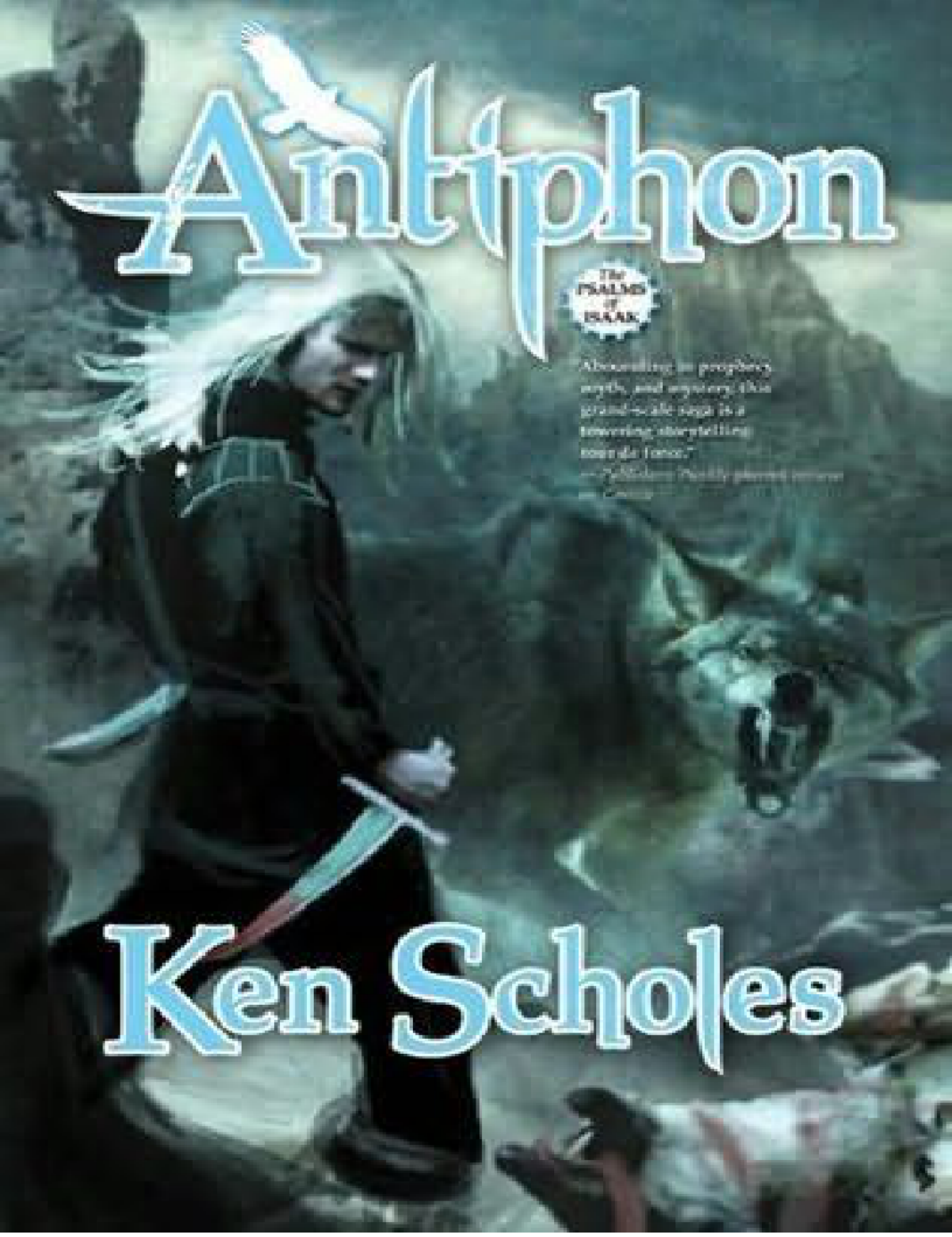
Antiphon
The Psalms of Isaak
"Abounding in prophecy, myth, and mystery, this grand-scale saga is a towering storytelling tour de force."
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Antiphon

Prelude

A rising full moon washed the calm sea in brighter tones of blue and green, bathing the shoreline as well as the robed figures who stood upon it in dim aquamarine light. Overhead, stars danced and guttered in a warm night sky.

Rafe Merrique leaned on the gunwale of the longboat and scanned the shore. Behind him, the Kinshark lay at anchor in the shallow bay, unmagicked for now in these abandoned waters. Ahead, he saw a small gathering of men amid their wagons and horses.

"They have the look of Francines," he whispered to his first mate.

The man grunted a reply as he worked the oars. Rafe kept his attention on the beach. There were four figures in view, their backs turned and their hoods up so that he could not see their faces.

But why are they so far from home? Merrique was a veteran of the horn, seasoned at bringing his ship and crew through the Ghosting Crests and into the Churning Wastes. He'd spent half his life running the Order back and forth on one secret venture or another. At first, he'd done it for the bits of magick and technology they'd offered him. Later, the money had been enough of an incentive.

And now, with the Order decimated and the Ninefold Forest assuming guardianship of Windwir's holdings, the Gypsies were his customers.

Until the moon sparrow found him, that is.

He'd just landed a fresh company of Gypsy Scouts to assist with the work at Sanctorum Lux and was turning his vessel west when the bird fell from the sky to perch on the railing of his forecastle. It was small and made of a silver metal so bright that the sunlight reflecting from it burned Rafe's eyes. It hopped twice, regarding him with emerald-jeweled eyes, before cocking its head and opening its tiny beak.

A reedy voice whispered out. "Rafe Merrique," it said, "the light requires service of your ship."

And if it weren't a bird he'd seen so many times before, bearing a

message he'd also heard many times, he might not have yelled for a pencil to scratch down the course heading and coordinates it suddenly chirruped before closing its beak and lifting into the summer sky to speed northeast.

Now, three weeks later, he approached by sea and studied the beach where the robed figures waited. The wagons were loaded down with supplies, but there was no sign of a camp. No welcoming fire, no tents, and no sound but the gentle lapping of the water and the whisper of oars.

"Ahoy," Rafe called out as they ran the longboat into the shallows. He stood and hopped over the side with a splash. The acrid scent of ozone and salt struck him. "You are a long ways from anywhere," he said.

The robed figures shuffled by their wagons, and an odd sound reached his ears. A wheezing-like a bellows-and the slightest metallic clacking. It was oddly familiar, though he could not place it at first.

"You are Captain Rafe Merrique of the Kinshark," a flat, inhuman voice said. One of the robed figures separated from the others.

Rafe's men were out of the longboats now, hands reaching for knives and cutlasses. He frowned. "Yes," he said. "I am-"

But when he saw the eyes, he could not finish his sentence. A sense of wrongness flooded him, and his mouth suddenly tasted like iron. He felt the hairs rise on his arms and the back of his neck. The eyes were amber jewels, dimly glowing in the recesses of the hood. Steam whistled out from the back of the robe, and as the figure approached, Rafe saw the metal hands and the metal feet. "The light," the metal man said, "requires service of your ship."

He stepped back slowly and whistled for his men to do the same. "What is this about?"

The metal man cocked its head. "You are not authorized to know. Archived data indicates that your vessel has been hired on seventy-three occasions to assist in various matters of transport and recovery for the Androfrancine Order."

Rafe glanced to the other robed figures. He saw the faint glow of their eyes and the gleam of moonlight on their metal hands. There were four of them. He'd seen the mechoservitor Isaak-he'd even conversed with the mechanical over breakfast during the voyage back to the Delta. Truly one of the Order's greatest wonders. And he'd heard bits of rumor and gossip among the men he'd transported-Charles, Aedric and the others-about the hidden library, Sanctorum Lux, reduced to ashes by mechoservitors now fled to unknown quarters.

"You're one of the mechanicals from Sanctorum Lux," he said.

But the mechoservitor ignored the statement. "Your arrival is the salvation of the light," the metal man said, stepping forward. "We have

urgent need of your vessel in the formulation of our response."

Rafe Merrique prided himself on knowing which jobs to take and which to turn down. This one, he realized, was the latter. I should not have come here. I should not have heeded the bird. His mouth went dry as he found the words. "My vessel," he said, "is not for hire after all."

"The Kinshark is a Tam-manufactured galleon sailing with a complement of forty-seven men," the metal man continued, again ignoring Rafe's words. "Stealth oils are applied routinely for concealment, and scout powders are administered to the crew in three shifts to maximize effectiveness and minimize adverse health impacts. The vessel boasts comfortable passenger accommodations and various holds-concealed and plain-for the transport of sensitive goods. Minimum seagoing complement is four men."

The other three robed figures were converging on them now, walking slowly, metal frames clicking and gears whirring beneath their plain gray robes.

"We're leaving now," Rafe told his men as he turned back to the longboat.

But as he moved toward the boat, a metal hand came down firmly upon his shoulder. Rafe spun, reaching for his cutlass, but another hand gripped his wrist and he cried out at the strength of it. Around him, his men surged to life, but the mechoservitors were faster and stronger. Struggling, he twisted against his captor and saw his first mate collapse beneath a hand on his windpipe. "You will be adequately compensated," the mechanical said, "upon our return."

Firm hands pulled him quickly toward the wagons. "Analysis indicates that with proper rationing the provided supplies will allow forty-seven men to survive fourteen days in this environment. The nearest intact Androfrancine supply cache is twelve days' march at a pace of thirty leagues per day. A map and lock ciphers have been provided for you. We will summon you by the bird when our return is imminent."

Rafe opened his mouth to speak, but the hand had now moved to his throat, and spiderwebs of thin, white light filled his vision as the pressure increased.

"My deepest apologies," the mechoservitor said, "for this violence and deception."

Then his world went gray.

When it came back into focus again, Rafe was bound to the wagon with his landing party. His crew of forty-six cursed and sputtered in the surf, so recently extricated from their vessel by the unexpected speed and force of its metal boarders. Underneath the clamor of their cursing came another sound: a hot night wind catching

the Kinshark's sails as she left for points unknown.

Eyes fastened upon his departing vessel, Rafe Merrique added his own curses to those of his men and shouted for someone to untie him.

Chapter 1

Rudolfo Rudolfo urged his stallion forward and laughed with his son as the wind caught his turban. Overhead, the afternoon sun blazed in a sky so blue it burned the eye. Around them, a warm wind stirred the Prairie Sea, golden waves rippling across the vast, rolling expanse. Ahead and around them, on the horizon, the Ninefold Forest rose up to meet the sky.

"He takes well to the ride, General," a voice shouted to his left above the pounding of the hooves.

Rudolfo looked to Aedric, the first captain of his Gypsy Scouts, and grinned. "Aye. He does." Then, he leaned forward and whistled the horse faster as Jakob squealed with delight. They'd ridden long enough now for father and son to both grow comfortable with the riding harness that held the swaddled infant snug against Rudolfo's chest.

The same that bore me upon my father's steed. Rudolfo felt the slightest stab of loss. Those knives were different upon him now that he himself was a father. The cut upon his soul took a different turn as the moments with his new heir brought back hazy recollections of his own rides with the man he'd named his son for-the man Rudolfo had watched die in his twelfth year. And those memories came with others-wrestling with his brother in the shallows of the Rajblood River, singing in the forest with his mother, learning the Hymnal of the Wandering Army with Gregoric, Aedric's father, now nearly two years dead.

Those memories had brought sadness to him many times before, but now, alongside the grief, he found hope and joy in remembering. This child helps me find the good in it, Rudolfo realized.

A whistle to his right brought his head around. Low in the saddle and laughing herself, Jin Li Tam pulled ahead of him.

"You're slowing down, old man," she shouted over her shoulder. Her red hair, shining in the sunlight, caught wind and flowed behind. She wore the rainbow-colored riding silks of a Gypsy queen, and though they were unnecessary and did not match her chosen outfit, she also wore the scout knives that had once belonged to his mother.

They'd been on the move for two months now, visiting each of his forest manors, introducing a jubilant people to the heir they had longed to see. Of course, so soon on the heels of their wedding at the Seventh Forest Manor, each stop simply continued the celebration as each of his towns rallied to honor both his bride and his boy.

And they honor me as well. They always had, even back to his days as a boy king. But until recently, like those losses in his life, it

had meant something different to him. Now, it was a kind of amazement tempered by a gratitude he'd never felt before.

Paramo had been their last stop-a logging town that now stretched itself into a city as refugees settled in to work the old-growth forest, milling the wood and shipping it south by river for the library Rudolfo and Isaak built. Tonight, they would rest easy in their own bed. And tomorrow, Rudolfo would approach the waiting tower of paper that no doubt threatened collapse as it dared gravity there in the basket on his desk. Still, it had been a good respite between the first rains and the last of the sun.

A flash of white on the horizon caught his eye, and Rudolfo slowed his horse at the familiar sight. It shimmered and blurred in the heat of the day, moving in a straight line toward them, low to the tops of the grass. When the bird struck Aedric's catch net, Rudolfo matched his pace with that of his first captain and watched as the man stripped the note, read the knotted message in the blue thread and unrolled the scroll.

Behind them, the rest of their caravan slowed. Ahead, Jin Li Tam turned and doubled back in a wide and sweeping circle.

Aedric frowned and turned, looking to the northwest. Rudolfo followed his gaze. In the distance, the Dragon's Spine rose up, gray and impenetrable, above the Prairie Sea and the Ninefold Forest that spread like ancient islands across it.

Rudolfo laid his hand upon Jakob's cheek. Aedric's grim look in the direction of the Marshlands told him the source of this latest news. "What are they up to now?"

It had been six months since the Council of Kin-Clave. Half a year since the woman Ria had announced herself as the Machtvolk queen and saved his son's life before slipping back into the north and vanishing behind her closely watched borders. The Named Lands had slid into madness and disarray, though of late there had been a brooding peace of sorts.

Aedric's voice brought him back to the moment. Already, the young captain was inking a response and twisting knots of reply into the blue thread of inquiry. "They've breached our borders again, General."

Rudolfo sighed. "Where now?"

"Glimmerglam."

He felt his stomach sink. Jin Li Tam had slowed her horse to a trot and joined them. "We were just there three weeks ago."

Aedric nodded. "Two evangelists this time. Preaching their so-called gospel in the streets openly. The house steward has them locked away for now. I'll deal with them once we're home and I've seen to the men."

Rudolfo stroked his beard. This had started not long after the council there on the plains of Windwir. Initially, they had found Marshers wandering the Prairie Sea or the more isolated parts of the Ninefold Forest. These they turned back-even chased back-to the low hills that served as a border between his lands and the woman who called herself Winteria the Elder and claimed the Wicker Throne. Later, the ragged preachers had shown up in the towns surrounding his forest manors. These, his militia beat and delivered back to their border. It was less violent than what his father would have done, and still it made Rudolfo wince. Lord Jakob would have placed them on Tormentor's Row, and after a day or two under the knives of his Physicians of Penitent Torture, they'd have seen the value of keeping their beliefs within their territory. If they'd returned, he'd have had them killed and would have buried them at the border.

The beatings had seemed a reasonable compromise when reason failed.

But still they persist. Rudolfo sighed. "I think a new tack is in order," he finally said, glancing down at his son. "Have them brought to me."

Aedric's face registered surprise. "You want to see them?"

Rudolfo nodded. "I do. I want to speak with them. Question them."

He glanced to Jin Li Tam. She regarded him with a face he could not read, but her hands moved with subtle grace along the reins. He admired the care she took to be sure none saw but him. Are you certain giving them voice is the answer?

He smiled, though it was brief and felt out of place. He'd just started teaching her the subverbal language of House Y'Zir last month, and she was nearly proficient. Of course, she'd already known eleven other subverbals. Rudolfo's fingers moved over Jakob's shoulder and head as he formed his reply. I'm not certain.

Rudolfo felt the power of his words even as his hands made them. He truly wasn't certain, and it was foreign to him. "I think our old strategies are no longer serving us well," he said, keeping his gaze steady on her blue eyes.

Then, he looked away from her, toward Aedric. "Be certain they're well cared for, Aedric. I intend to return them whole to their bloodletting queen."

He did not wait for Aedric to speak before he pushed his horse forward. He wondered if Jin Li Tam would follow him but secretly hoped she wouldn't. He needed this time for himself and his son.

Two years ago, he'd ridden these same plains, Gregoric at his side. A shadow had moved over the light of that second summer day, and he'd looked up to a pillar of smoke on the sky. He marked it now as a

day when his life-and his world-changed utterly. From that moment, so many other changes had flowed out to him, sweeping him away with the force of their current, including his betrothal to Jin Li Tam and the birth of their son.

He felt the warmth of his son against his chest and thought about the new shadow passing over the light that remained. Six months earlier, at the edge of spring, he'd watched Ria bring Petronus back from the dead with her blood magicks and had watched his betrothed beg for their son's life as a result of it, the culmination of a grand manipulation. With relations already strained, the events on the Plains of Windwir had driven an even deeper wedge between his houses and the other nations of the Named Lands. Pylos had broken off kin-clave entirely, and Turam was close behind. The Delta remained a loose ally, but it was a paper kin-clave as they wrestled through the upheaval of political reform. And now, adherents to this new Y'Zirite Resurgence brought their sermons into his lands, preaching them to his people and pointing to his son as their so-called Child of Promise.

As he whistled his horse to a gallop, Rudolfo wondered what path he would take. His own words came back to haunt him: I am uncertain. It was a strange sensation, not knowing the best path to take.

He felt the sun on his face and savored the wind that pulled at his silk clothing and his scarf of rank. Silent for a time, Jakob gurgled and laughed again.

When Rudolfo placed his hand over his child's chest he felt strength there. His fingers moved, and he tapped a message there. Whatever I do, I do for your future.

He could not bring himself to laughter now with the gravity of that thought. Instead, he kept his hand there and urged his stallion faster, finding delight in the voice of his son and purpose in the heart that beat lightly beneath the palm of his hand.

"My best and truest compass," Rudolfo said in a quiet voice.

Then, he turned his horse toward the line of old-growth forest and raced homeward to his waiting work. Neb Holding his thorn rifle loosely, Neb lay still and studied the dust cloud that moved across the shattered landscape of the Churning Wastes. The afternoon sun baked the ground beneath him, and from his vantage point in the hills, he watched heat waves rising from the sand and rock floor of the valley below. There, against the backdrop of that shimmer, a figure ran under cover of magicks.

This was the third time they'd encountered magicked runners in the Deep Wastes in as many weeks.

Shielding his eyes, he chewed the black root and watched. Using fixed patches of scrub or outcroppings of rock to mark distance,

counting silently beneath his breath, Neb ciphered out the runner's speed as he had with the others. He moved too fast for the scout magicks Neb had trained under during his short time with the Gypsies. Faster even than the black root would allow.

Neb had a theory but didn't want it to be true.

If his theory was correct, the scout below would not only be fast-he would be strong, too. Stronger than four men. And he would be dead in three days' time, once the blood magicks burned their way through his organs.

Neb shuddered. A sudden memory of Rudolfo's Firstborn Feast gripped him-the sudden clamor of third alarm as the doors burst inward, the invisible wall of iron that pushed through the Gypsy Scouts as if they were made of paper, assassinating Hanric and Ansylus. It had been a dark night of violence throughout the Named Lands.

Blood magicks. Forbidden by kin-clave in the New World and the product of older ways-the way of the Wizard Kings with their cuttings and bloodlettings and bargains made in the Beneath Places.

He glanced to his right where Renard lay, also scanning the landscape below. The Waste Guide wore the tattered robe of an Androfrancine and the sturdy boots of a Delta scout. He lay with a spyglass to his eye, his own thorn rifle within easy reach. Renard's mouth was a grim line.

"Three now," Neb said in a whisper.

Renard's eyes narrowed as he pulled back from the glass. "More are coming, I suspect."

But from where? And more importantly, why?

After Renard's leg had healed from his brutal encounter with the mechoservitor at D'Anjite's Bridge, they'd spent months in the deeper Wastes. By day, Neb learned not only how to survive, but how to thrive in the harshness of the blasted lands. He'd learned how to trap, how to hunt, and how to find the scant pockets of life that sprang up hidden in the Wastes. Renard had shown him the secret gun grove nestled in an arroyo at the base of the Dragon's Spine and had taught him how to harvest both the rifles and their thorn pods from the tangled thicket they grew in. Then, he'd taught him how to use them.

At night, Neb held the silver crescent to his ear and listened to the strains of the song that trickled out from it, trying to find his way into the dream he knew lay beneath that haunting music. Even now, he heard it faintly, though the crescent was wrapped tightly in thick wool and buried in his pack. He'd deciphered bits of the code within the song-series of numbers without meaning to him-but so far, he'd not been able to interpret what response the canticle required.

It chewed him, not knowing.

But somewhere out here, he knew there were metal servants who did know the response. Yet in months of searching, there had been no sign of the metal men themselves, only evidence of where they had been. Carefully concealed digs. Empty supply caches. He and Renard moved from place to place, tracking them as they could.

Between them and the song, Neb already had two Whymer Mazes to solve. Now the runners presented him with yet another.

Already, the figure below had disappeared behind a massive outcropping of fused glass and stone, and Renard tucked the spyglass back into his pouch as he pulled himself up into a crouch. Neb did the same.

Renard scratched his close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair. "You say the blood magicks will kill the user in three days' time?"

Neb nodded. "That's what Aedric told us." Even the scout magicks that Neb had trained under could eventually kill a man if he hadn't been raised up in them from an early age and if he didn't exercise caution and moderation in their use.

Renard backed away from their vantage point and bent to pick up his pack. "It makes no sense," he said. "We're weeks from anywhere-at least two from the coast and three from the Keeper's Gate. Three days wouldn't get them very far."

Neb chewed his root and pondered this. His Franci training took hold, and he remembered their seventh precept. The simplest path is most often the best to take. "Perhaps it's a different kind of magick, then. Or"-here, the root became more bitter in his mouth "-perhaps they've found a way to prolong their exposure to the magicks."

Renard stood upright now, his eyes to the north. "That seems likely. We should get word to the Gypsies. One was an oddity; two was a problematic coincidence." He looked to Neb. "Three is a pattern."

Neb pulled his own pack on and cinched the straps tight on his shoulders. "Rudolfo will want to know what these runners are up to."

"Yes." Renard's voice sounded far away.

When Neb looked up, he realized the man watched him carefully. He'd run with Renard for long enough to read him and could see the discomfort in his eyes now. "I think we need to find that out, too," the Waste Guide said. "Something tells me it can't possibly be good."

Neb felt the slightest tickle of fear in the deeper part of his stomach and at the base of his spine. "What are you proposing?"

"There's still a Gypsy camp at Sanctorum Lux," Renard said. "You know the way. And you can handle yourself in the Wastes, Neb. You've taken to it like a kin-wolf cub." He nodded to the north. "I can track our new friend for a bit, see what he's up to. You bear word to the Gypsies and meet up with me at the Dreaming Well in three

weeks' time."

Neb blinked and felt the fear spreading farther into him. No longer a tickle, now it was as cold and pervasive as the Second River in winter. He'd spent months in the Wastes with Renard and certainly had known at some point they'd part company, even if only for a season. Still, now that the moment stared him down, his mouth was dry and his feet felt rooted. "Are you sure-"

Renard offered a grim smile. "You're ready, Nebios." He dug about in his pouch and pulled out a smaller cloth sack tied shut with a bit of twine. He passed it over to him. "You know how to use the powders. Be wary of mixing them with the root for too long-they burn harder and will wear you down faster. If you run into anything you can't handle use the magicks."

Neb opened his mouth to protest but couldn't find the words. Renard was right, of course. He could do this. And it made sense that one of them should track the runner-and that Renard, being the most experienced, was the best candidate for that work. Still, Neb felt the hesitation in both his mind and his body. During his time in the Wastes, Renard had been a constant, and the thought of striking out alone, even for three weeks, frightened him.

Renard's eyes were on him, and the man raised a hand to place it on Neb's shoulder and squeeze it quickly. Then, he dropped his arm. "You're ready for this. Hebda would be proud."

His father's name settled the fear in his stomach. Or maybe, he thought, it gave him the resolve he needed to face that fear. "Three weeks then… at the well."

"Three weeks," Renard said with a final nod. Then, he turned and ran north along the ridgeline, dust from his boot heels rising behind him as the root took hold and his speed increased.

Neb watched him run until he could no longer see him, then took a deep breath. Cinching the straps of his pack even tighter, he willed his legs to carry him southward.

As his feet found their way, he turned his mind back to the song, and not for the first time, he wondered if he would ever hear within it what the mechoservitor assured him lay beneath the notes.

Those few times he'd discussed it with Renard, the Waste guide had simply shrugged. "You'll hear it when it's time to hear it."

Neb had wondered what the man knew that he wasn't saying.

He'd run twenty leagues before he finally placed his pondering on a shelf in the hidden corners of his mind. Tonight would be soon enough for those questions, when the moon was up and the song was at its loudest. Alongside it, he shelved his questions about the magicked runners and instead tried to turn his mind westward toward Winters, the girl he loved. The girl who had first pointed him toward

his purpose in the days before that purpose had sundered them.

But when he could not remember her face, he set that aside as well and gave himself over to the warmth of the sun on his neck and the fingers of wind in his long, flowing white hair. He blessed the solid ground beneath his feet and the steady rhythm of each breath moving in and out of him, keeping time with the pounding of his heart.

As the sky moved into twilight, a kin-wolf howled in the mounded ruins of a city to his east. In his ears, it was a cry of praise and despair.

I would join you in your song, Neb thought.

But instead, he simply ran and gave himself to the running. Jin Li Tam The Seventh Forest Manor stirred to life when the sky was still pink from dawn. Servants bustled, laying fires to heat water and cook breakfast, all under the watchful eye of Lady Ilyna. Jin Li Tam moved quietly among them, smiling at each member of the staff that she passed on her way to the back door near the kitchen.

It was unusual for her to awaken before Rudolfo. Typically, he rose first and it was his rising that started her slow journey to wakefulness. But these last several mornings, even while camping on the Prairie Sea or staying in another of his nine Forest Houses, she'd found herself waking first. This morning, she received it as a gift. She had much to do.

Besides, she told herself as she stepped into the cool morning, this was better than the dreams she'd been having of late. Their frequency and intensity had let up since Jakob's healing there in the midst of the Desolation of Windwir, but when they did visit her, the darkness and terror in them was smothering.

Lately, they'd been about the children.

She walked quickly through the back gardens, past Rudolfo's Whymer Maze, nodding to the Gypsy Scouts who stood at the small, rear gate of the manor. The younger of the two men opened the gate for her and she passed through. She followed the trail until the forest swallowed her; then she broke into a gentle run and left the path, letting the wet ferns slap at her as she built speed.

She wore loose trousers and a looser shirt for these excursions, trading her low, sturdy boots for a pair of doeskin moccasins that protected her feet without encumbering them. And of course, she wore the knives Rudolfo had given her for their wedding-blades she'd already helped herself to and had even wetted in battle in the days of violence that had culminated in the blood magick that spared her son.

Like the manor, the forest also came to life around her. Birdsong echoed beneath a dark canopy, and foliage shuddered and whispered with the movement of wildlife slipping back into dens to sleep out the

day. Mist clung to the ground, lending the wooded terrain an ominous beauty. She ran through it, leaving the familiar path in favor of making her own.

She built speed until she felt the sweat trickling down the sides of her breasts, until she tasted iron in the back of her mouth, until her breathing deepened with effort. Then, she held that pace.

As she ran, she thought about the day ahead of her.

First, she would see to Jakob. And after feeding him, she'd dress him and take him to see the other children. Isaak had tasked one of the mechoservitors with basic education and childcare, drawing on theories from the vast tomes of Franci thought they now re-created for the new library. They had built a school for the children at the base of the hill where that massive structure slowly took shape. She'd wanted to bring them into the Seventh Forest Manor, but there had simply been too many of them; in the end, her father had suggested that this would be more in their best interest.

Memories of the nightmare tugged at her and she increased her speed slightly, as if the extra effort might exorcise the iron knives and the children's screams from her nightmares.

Y'Zirite monsters. It still closed her throat to think about it. Somewhere southeast of them, in the Ghosting Crests, her father worked with a small remnant of their family to learn what he could about the Blood Temple that had so recently cut most of House Li Tam out of the world.

To save my son, she realized, by making from the blood of others a magick so powerful it could raise the dead, or cure the deathly ill.

She felt the heat of her shame and transmuted it into anger, forcing her legs to bear her rage, savoring the slap of the foliage across her skin as she ran.

I am the forty-second daughter of Vlad Li Tam, she thought as she ran. I am the queen of the Ninefold Forest Houses.

But another voice whispered inside of her-the voice of that so-called Machtvolk queen, Winteria the Elder-calling her by a title she still did not fully comprehend: You are the Great Mother.

She felt the woman's feet again within her grasping hands, saw the woman standing above her blurred by tears of terror and hope as she begged for her son's life. She heard again Rudolfo's cry of surprise and saw him, too, also trapped behind her curtain of tears, standing in the doorway of the massive tent in the last of winter, upon Windwir's blasted plain.

She turned east and pushed harder, but the run could not strip away the image of her scarred and broken father and the compound of scarred and broken children, cut with the mark of House Y'Zir over their hearts.

As she ran, the forest took on a gloomy silence that weighed heavy on her. But just as she noted the silence, a sound that did not belong there reached her ears.

It was the slightest high-pitched whine, so slight that it tickled her ears, barely discernible over the sound of her pounding heart and feet. Then, another sound-the guttural cry of a bird of prey, the muffled flapping of its wings.

By instinct, she turned toward the noise and slowed. Her right hand moved toward a knife handle even as her left moved out ahead of her to slow the slapping branches.

The whine shifted into a staccato burst of chirps just as Jin Li Tam moved into a small clearing. There, at the center, an enormous bird pecked and clawed at a rotting tree trunk. The chirping rose in volume as if fear fueled it. She drew her knife slowly.

The raven was weathered, its feathers mottled and its large head scarred. It turned as she approached and regarded her with one midnight-colored eye. Its beak opened, and a static hiss leaked out as it cocked its head at her.

I've seen you before, she realized. She remembered the dream vividly. "What are you hunting, kin-raven?" she whispered.

And how do I know what you are called? The kin-raven was a bird from older times, from the Age of the Wizard Kings. Though some claimed to have seen them in the skies of late.

In the dim gloom of morning, she thought she saw a flash of silver behind the bird. Something twitching in the hollow of the trunk, just out of the larger bird's reach.

Jin Li Tam balanced the knife in her hand and crouched. When she threw it, the blade flew straight and struck the kin-raven with its handle. The bird flapped and shrieked at her as she drew her second knife.

"Begone, kin-raven," she said in a low voice.

It turned its head, casting a long glance at the tree stump. Then, as if understanding her, it launched itself into the sky to speed northwest.

Jin Li Tam recovered her knife and approached the stump. There, huddled in the hollow, a tiny bird shivered and chirped. It sparked and popped as it moved, the flashes illuminating its delicate, silver form.

The chirps slowed slightly, and she suddenly realized they were much more than the sound of fright and panic. The numbers were clear despite the speed with which they streamed from the tiny beak.

She knelt and stretched a hand into the hollow but did not take hold of the small mechanical bird. Instead, she flattened her hand in the way her father had shown her when she was a little girl standing

with him at the open cage of his golden bird, which had been at least twice-maybe three times-larger than this one.

"Where have you come from, little sparrow?" she asked it, forcing calm into her voice. "And where are you going?"

The numbers ceased, but the beak remained open. A metallic voice leaked out. "Mechoservitor Number Three, Seventh Forest Manor, Ninefold Forest Houses," it said. "Message follows."

It sparked again.

Jin Li Tam withdrew her hand and sat back. Mechoservitor Number Three? She knew that title: It was Isaak's designation before Rudolfo had named him there in the Desolation of Windwir, where they had all first met nearly two years ago.

The numbers started up once more, and she regarded the small and huddled form. Again, she stretched her hand out. "I am Jin Li Tam," she said, "queen of the Ninefold Forest. I can take you to Isaak"-she corrected herself-"Mechoservitor Number Three."

But even as she said it, she wondered if the tiny mechanical could possibly understand her. Her father's bird-now caged in Isaak's office in the basement of the Great Library-had understood basic commands but did not have even a fraction of the range that a larger mechanical like Isaak had when it came to memory, speech and analytical function.

Still, her musing was cut short when the chirping abruptly ceased and the bird shuddered one last time. A final pop and spark, and it lay still within the hollow. One tiny jeweled eye went dark.

Biting her lower lip, Jin Li Tam stretched out her fingers and carefully pulled the delicate bird from its hiding place. Its tiny feathers were of a silver so intense that it threw back the reflection of her eye as she studied it and wondered if it could be fixed.

Isaak had repaired her father's bird. Charles, the man who had built Isaak and the others, surely had similar skills. He was the last of the Androfrancines in the Ninefold Forest, the rest of the remnant having followed Petronus east into the old Pope's exile in the Churning Waste.

They would know what do, she told herself.

Cradling the silver bird in her hands, Jin Li Tam cut short her morning run and let this new mystery wash away her rage and shame for the moment. As she turned toward home, she wondered what word this tiny messenger carried to Isaak, and why.

Whatever it carried, the kin-raven had brought it down just short of its destination, and she knew of a certainty that there was intent behind that hunting. That the dark bird of prey had sped west and north did not surprise her at all.

As the sun rose behind her, the tiny bird in her cupped hands

took on the mottled shading of a red morning sky as light pierced the forest canopy, and Jin Li Tam felt cold fingers moving over her skin.

It was the color of blood.

It was the color of her dreams, as well.

Chapter 2

Petronus Petronus awoke, shivering in sheets soaked from his own sweat. He kicked them away and sat up, his hand moving instinctively to the scar that burned at his throat.

Again.

Eyes closed, he gulped in the warm night air and listened to the kin-wolves howling in the distant Wastes. His hand moved along the rough skin of his neck, then moved to the scar over his heart that burned even hotter. Forcing his eyes open, he reached for the cup of tepid water on his nightstand and drained it with one long gulp.

Outside, the Gypsy Watch on the Keeper's Wall whistled the last all's clear before dawn. Standing, Petronus groped for his robe and pulled it on.

The dreams were harder now, more urgent in their demand to be heard.

But I can't hear them. They were all light and shadow without sound, vague moving images, ending finally in one burst of sudden noise that drove him awake, shouting and sweating ahead of the dawn.

Walking to his cabin's door, he cracked it open and looked out on the small compound he and the other Androfrancines shared, huddled against the Keeper's Gate where Rudolfo's Gypsy Scouts could watch over them. Of course, the only true threat against them lay within the Named Lands, on the other side of the locked and guarded gate that barred entrance to the Churning Wastes. But still, what remained of the Gray Guard took their turn at the watch, and a makeshift wall of tall pine logs stood nearly finished around the perimeter of the Androfrancine camp.

Petronus moved out into the predawn morning. Cool air from west of the Keeper's Wall stirred his wet, tangled hair, which he pushed out of his eyes as he moved forward, barefoot.

"Chai's nearly ready," Grymlis said in a low voice when Petronus approached his watch fire.

Petronus chuckled. "You're expecting me now."

Grymlis shrugged. "You come each morning at the last whistle. How were they this time?"

Petronus moved to a round stone near the fire and sat, noticing the two mugs set out within reach of the boiling kettle.

How were they? He closed his eyes and let the memory of that light wash over him. He winced at it, his hand moving again to his breast as if it were enough to quell the heat that rose from his scars. Then, the roar of cacophony-the voice of many waters-and the terror it

raised within him as he clawed his way shrieking for wakefulness. He swallowed and opened his eyes, forcing them to meet Grymlis's across the fire. "About the same," he said.

"I wonder what your Franci dream mappers would say about these?"

Petronus wondered the same. He had at least two dozen volumes scattered around his small cabin, books he'd asked Isaak to send with the regular supply wagons. But dream interpretation relied on knowing enough of what was dreamt to identify the images and archetypes within it. Still, he parroted what he did know. "They'd say it was brought about by the trauma of the event, that it was a deeply planted anxiety response that will work its way out in time as my body and mind gradually accept what happened to me."

Grymlis chuckled. "And what do you say?"

His eyes went to the edge of the watch fire's light. "I'd say it was most likely a side effect of whatever blood magick they used to bring me back."

It's what he told himself. Because in truth, he felt no trauma from the act. The memory of it unfolded for him upon request-her hand moving slowly up, the cold ache of the blade as it opened him, the added layer of cold when the winter air touched his open wound. He could smell the blood, could hear the heavy indrawn breath of the surprised room, the slow wail of Rudolfo's son Jakob, and could feel his need for reckoning pulsing out onto the sawdust floor with his blood after his legs gave out and he fell.

Then, there was a consuming light and then nothing and, just beyond, a choking, gasping return.

But no trauma. A miracle, to be sure, and certainly not a comfortable one. But apart from the discomfort-and the dreams-his life felt normal enough.

Still, Petronus had not expected his life to go in such a direction.

To be a testimony in their blood-loving gospel. And more than that: to be used to compel Jin Li Tam, daughter of his old friend, to beg their aid for her dying son.

A new voice joined them, and Petronus jumped. "You would not be far from the truth," it said. "Exposure to blood magick had a similar effect upon the boy."

Blood magick? Boy? He looked up, but Grymlis no longer sat across from him. And he no longer sat at the fire. Instead, he sat in his study. The windows were open and afternoon sunlight poured in. He looked out of one window and saw the massive spires of Windwir's Great Library. He looked back to the speaker but did not recognize him.

He rubbed his forehead. Where had he been just now? "I'm sorry?

Which boy?"

"Nebios," the man said. He was an Androfrancine but not one Petronus recognized. His crest of office was unfamiliar to Petronus as well, which surprised him. He thought as Pope he'd known every office under his shepherd's staff. "He did not become sensitive to the dream until after he was exposed to the blood magicks at the fall of Windwir."

He remembered the dream the boy had about the Marsh King riding south, remembered also the dream about his proclamation of Petronus as Pope there in the ruins of the garden of consecration and coronation. His throat and chest itched. The light around him grew brighter. "Is this a dream?"

"No," the man said. "This is not the dream. This is about the dream. You are resisting it." Their eyes met. "Don't."

"I don't intend to resist," Petronus said. The scars burned now.

The man shrugged. "Intentions aside, learn to hear what the dream has to say. You've been chosen to hear it."

Outside, the light built and the sound of a metal voice, singing, reached Petronus's ears. There was a mighty roar building beneath it, a voice of many waters and-

Petronus blinked and it was dark again but for the dancing of the watch fire.

Something different, he thought.

Grymlis looked up as if he'd spoken. "Father?"

"Nothing, Grymlis," Petronus whispered, closing his eyes. The white light of Windwir still blazed behind his eyelids. Something different indeed.

One last kin-wolf howled as the sky moved from gray to purple. Then, the water hissed and burbled in its kettle, announcing that a new day could begin in the Churning Wastes. Winters The city outside her office window, now being called Rachyle's Rest by the refugees from the south, stirred to life as Winters sipped her second mug of tea and looked at the day's work that stretched ahead of her. She'd initially been provided quarters at the manor, but after that first month she'd chosen quarters in one of the completed sections of the new library, near Isaak and the other mechoservitors. Truth be told, she'd also spent her share of hours sleeping near the book makers' tents while the mechoservitors reproduced volume after volume through the warm summer nights. Somehow, their proximity soothed her.

And their simplicity, she thought, though she knew it was a misconceived notion. There was nothing simple about Isaak and his kind, though they presented a childlike innocence, a simple obedience to task, that made her envious.

She reached for the next report in her stack and paused, noting the back of her hand, her slender wrist, her long slightly tanned forearm. After all of these months, it still felt unnatural, and she still started when she saw her face in the mirror. She did not seem herself without the mud and ash of her father's faith-her own former faith-upon her.

And it goes deeper, beneath the skin. Once her dreams had ceased-both those pleasant dreams of Neb and home and those darker, more violent dreams of blood and iron-she'd discovered something hollow within her that she filled with work. And when she did not work, she read or helped Lynnae in the refugee quarter. Until they'd set out to ride the Nine Forest Manors, she'd spent a goodly amount of time with Jakob as well. It was the life she could forge for herself in this new home she'd chosen.

At least until Neb returns. She'd cried the day Aedric returned without him, though she'd kept that hidden and secret from the others. The first captain had pulled her aside as soon as he'd made his report to Rudolfo, and she'd read the message on his face before he gave it. Tell her I am called to find our home. That was all; nothing more. No words of love, no promise of a swift return. It had been yet another loss on top of so many others, and though she'd sent a dozen birds telling him that the quest was fruitless, that the dreams had misled them all, each had come back with her coded note untouched.

She heard the solid thud of metal feet in the corridor and took comfort in the gentle wheeze of pumping bellows, the whistle of steam, the whir of gears that accompanied it. She looked up at the tap on her door. "Yes?"

The door swung open, and Isaak's jeweled eyes blinked at her as the shutters opened and closed over them. "Good morning, Lady Winters."

At one time, he'd called her Winteria. All of them had, but in the days since her supposed sister's return to the Named Lands, bearing the same name, Winters had insisted she be called by her less formal nickname. And when she thought of the woman who supplanted her-a woman who looked too much like her to not be kin-she forced herself to think of that usurper as Ria, though part of her knew that along with everything else, even her very name was lost despite the clever shell game she played with it.

"Good morning, Isaak," she said. "How was the night's work?"

"Two hundred twelve complete volumes," he said, eye shutters flapping. "We will bring the work into the western basement at the end of the week in preparation for winter." They had used the manor last winter, she recalled. The house staff had hidden it well, but she'd seen the traces of that work when she visited with Hanric for Rudolfo's

Firstborn Feast.

The first of those losses had arrived that night, and Hanric's funeral was the last time she'd seen Neb in the flesh. "And is Rudolfo still dedicating the wing this week?"

Isaak nodded, steam whistling from the exhaust grate set in his back. "Yes."

Winters smiled, wondering if Isaak felt proud. After eighteen months of construction, the lowest basements were in place and the first wing stood ready. Ornate shelves, built in Paramo and sent by barge, housed the first volumes brought back from the Desolation of Windwir. Thick carpets from the finest silks of the Emerald Coasts lay atop polished wooden planks. She'd wandered the wing at night, alone, her lungs pulling in the heavy smell of paper, wood and ink. It intoxicated her and made her wish she'd seen the Great Library that made up such an important part of Neb's childhood before they met in the midst of its ruins. "Let me know if I can help," she told him.

Isaak's eye shutters flashed. "I will, Lady Winters. Good morning to you." He inclined his head slightly, then turned and pulled her door closed as he left.

Winters tried to force herself back to her work but found herself restless. Instead, she turned to her office's small bookcase and pulled down a volume of collected legends of the Age of the Weeping Czars and the Year of the Falling Moon. She turned the pages slowly, savoring the words she found there. She found the Last Weeping Czar, Frederico, the most compelling. Love out of reach, a lost throne, the end of a way of life. The resonance gripped her.

A rapping at the narrow window in the corner startled her, and she looked up to a muffled cry from outside. She'd seen the kin-ravens before, both in dreams and in the sky, but never one so close. It stood outside, filling the small window in its size, and pecked again at the thick glass. Then, it hopped back and cocked its head, regarding her with one blood-red eye.

The bird had seen better days. It was singed and missing feathers. One eye was closed over with scar tissue.

Her first inclination was the bell. Her eye darted to it and she raised her hand. Swallowing, she tasted the copper of fear in a mouth gone suddenly dry.

I should call for the guards. But something else asserted itself within her, and instead she stood slowly. "What business have you here?" she asked the kin-raven in a quiet voice.

As if hearing her, it hopped forward and pecked again at the glass. Then, it waited and watched.

Approaching slowly, she stretched up on tiptoes to reach for the window's latch. Then, she paused as her fingers found it. What am I

doing? she asked herself.

But a certainty grew within her that this bird at her window was there with intent, that it had come for her and bore some note that she must read, though she saw no colored thread tied to its foot.

Holding her breath, she worked the latch and pushed the window up. A cool morning wind wafted scents of wood smoke and evergreen into the room, but under the surface of those smells was a darker, older smell of carrion and dank earth.

For a moment, the kin-raven regarded her and then tipped its head to one side. Its beak opened, and a familiar voice whispered out from it.

"Winteria bat Mardic, my younger namesake, I send you greetings," her sister's voice said. "It grieves me that our meeting was not better orchestrated and that you are not now by my side working with me to establish our new home by the grace of the Crimson Empress." Winters watched as the beak remained open and the kin-raven pulled in a deep breath. "But it is fortunate that you have remained with the Great Mother and the Child of Promise. Even now, my ambassadors approach to seek audience with Lord Rudolfo, but I fear he will not hear the dark tidings I bear. The Child of Promise is in grave danger. I have sent my kin-raven to you that you might bear word to your hosts and entreat them to take heed and accept my offer of aid in this matter."

The bird paused again, and Winters felt the words taking root within her. Certainly, she knew she could not trust this woman who claimed kinship with her. If Lord Tam and Rudolfo were correct, her entire faith was a fabric of lies created by Jin Li Tam's grandfather to bring down Windwir for reasons they were only just beginning to understand. She'd heard their speculation, late at night, of a foe beyond the borders of their New World.

The bird continued. "We are kin, you and I, and despite our differences I bear you nothing but deepest love. Bear this word to Rudolfo. Bear this word to the Great Mother: The Child of Promise was not saved to die at the hands of wicked men."

The bird's beak closed and it hopped back, away from her. For a moment, she thought she might leap up, reach out, grab it, hold it and cry out for the guards to assist. But even as the thoughts formed, the bird leaped up and unfurled its wings, pounding at the quiet morning air.

She watched it as it sped west, and then she went looking for her boots so she could climb down from Library Hill to seek out Aedric and Rudolfo.

Winters had no reason to trust this message or messenger, but the dark, cold pit of fear in her stomach was a feeling she'd learned to

trust over these last years.

As she let herself out into the morning, Jakob's tiny face and hands flashed across her memory; Ria's words followed: The Child of Promise was not saved to die at the hands of wicked men.

Winters hurried her pace and wondered what new darkness awaited them now. As she walked quickly down the cobblestone road that led into town, the morning sun kissed the back of her neck and the top of her head with a warmth she could not feel. Vlad Li Tam The setting sun washed the clear water in a purple so deep that it was nearly black. Overhead, the first of the stars struggled against a sky that was still too bright for them to shine in, and Vlad Li Tam sighed.

Of late, he'd taken to fishing again, though he knew that it would be more effective if he went out in the boats with those sons and daughters of his working that particular shift. Rod and tackle from the high dock was not nearly as efficient as their casting nets. Still, Petronus had taught him as a boy that the art of it was to love the act of fishing more than the act of catching. And moreover, it gave him time alone to think.

Don't fool yourself. It also gives you time to watch the water. Yes, he thought.

Behind him, the dinner bell sounded out from the halls of the Y'Zirite Blood Temple he and his family now called home. Rudolfo had rescued what few remained of House Li Tam from this place in a chaotic night some six months past. Vlad Li Tam had returned weeks later to take revenge on the Resurgence that operated the island temple, but they had found it abandoned.

Still, they spent months scouring the building for any clue they could possibly find. They'd dived into the wreckage of the ships Rafe Merrique and his men had scuttled in the harbor. They'd dug through the mass graves and refuse pits. They'd wandered every last span of the island to gather what little they could about the people who'd occupied this place. They'd even established regular scouting expeditions deeper into the Ghosting Crests in search of vessels he knew must be out there-vessels that did not match the line and trim of the New World.

And while they searched, Vlad Li Tam allowed each stained stone in the temple to remind him of the last words of the children and grandchildren he'd lost beneath the cutters' knives while Ria whispered love into his ear and left her own scars upon his flesh and soul. He remembered each cry, each stanza of every poem they screamed to him while the Machtvolk queen extracted agony from him along with his blood and the blood of his family. Blood used for magick-making, to resurrect Petronus and heal Vlad's forty-second daughter's son. All to establish a gospel and a strategy that his own

father had helped design in a grand betrayal that left Vlad filled with rage and despair at once.

He shifted on the dock and looked to his rod and line. He'd taken no fish this evening, but it was fine. There would be plenty of food. Some of his children harvested the plentiful island while others hunted or fished, and supply ships from the Delta, financed by the Ninefold Forest, kept them well stocked with other provisions.

No, he did not care so much about the catching. Or the fishing for that matter, if he were honest. His eyes went again to the water.

You want to see it again.

He closed his eyes and tried to conjure it up. It had happened in the midst of pandemonium and madness. Rudolfo, magicked, had freed Vlad's children from the holding cells in the tower's basement and had taken the woman Ria hostage. He'd loosed Vlad, and they'd fought their way down the hill to the docks.

When his first grandson, Mal Li Tam, had threatened the youngest children, he'd given himself over in exchange for their promised safety, and when he'd seen his opportunity, he'd taken it. Sometimes, at night, he still dreamed it.

The solid thud of Mal's head striking the railing. The warm immersion chased quickly by the pain of salt water in his open wounds. His hands clutching at the throat of his first son's first son as they went deeper and deeper.

And the light. It was blue-green, and it filled the deeper waters with song. He'd named his forty-second daughter for the d'jin that swam the Ghosting Crests without having seen one. But to behold it-if that indeed was what he saw there-was stunning. Buried in the pain of loss, he'd felt love from it, and when strong hands pulled at him a part of him wanted to be released, allowed to drown in that love.

Footsteps sounded on the dock behind him, and he knew them instantly. "I heard the bell, Baryk," he said. "I'll be up soon."

The large warpriest sat down beside him. "How's the fishing?"

Vlad chuckled. "The fishing is fine. The catching, not so much."

Baryk also laughed; then his voice turned serious. "It's good that you're here," he said. "I'd hoped to talk with you alone."

Vlad turned and regarded the man. Baryk had married into his family, and though he'd always relied on the older warpriest, in the months since his daughter-Baryk's wife-had died, writhing in agony as the blood magicks consumed her, he'd grown to see the man in a new light. He suspected that the 'Francis would say that the trauma of the loss they experienced together bonded them in a deeper way. With most of his oldest children now dead and buried here on the island, Vlad had learned to lean on Baryk for strategy and wisdom.

Now, the old warpriest looked worried and worn. "What's on your

mind, Baryk?"

He sighed. "I don't think we're going to learn any more from this place."

Vlad nodded. They'd gone over every last bit of it. They'd found the bargaining pool and the blood-distillery within it, though the Y'Zirites who had fled Tam's return had poisoned it somehow before leaving. "You think we should leave," he said in a flat voice.

"We have four ships. We could hire more, step up our forays south and east."

His eyes went once more to the water. "What about Merrique's ship?"

Baryk shook his head. "Still no word."

The old pirate had been out of touch a goodly while now, House Li Tam's birds unanswered for nearly two months.

Vlad looked from the water to the island behind him. "This would be a logical point on the map to operate from," he said. But before Baryk spoke, Vlad knew what he would say.

"It would," the warpriest said, "but I think your family is restless. I think this constant reminder of loss is no longer sharpening your blade." He paused. "It may even dull it."

Vlad turned from the man and looked back to the water. "You may be right, Baryk. I'll consider it."

Baryk inclined his head slightly. "It's all I ask, Father."

He calls me father now. It stirred something in him, and he savored the meaning in it. He remembered the first time it had happened, the day they'd buried Rae Li Tam in the frozen plain of Windwir. Baryk had not done it in front of the other children, though. No, he reserved the title for the times they were alone, and Vlad understood that very well. He looked to his daughter's widower and forced a smile. "You are a good man, Baryk."

Baryk stood and returned the smile. "Shall I tell them you're coming soon?"

Vlad nodded. "Soon."

As the warpriest's footfalls faded across the wooden dock, Vlad pulled in his line. The man was right, of course. They had learned everything they could from this place. And it was a reminder, a constant reminder.

One that I need, he thought, though as he thought it he also knew that perhaps what little remained of his family did not need such reminding.

I will grow my pain into an army. They were the words that had carried him through the worst of the cuttings, the worst of his children's screams. And they were the words that his daughter had later given him with her final breath.

Perhaps it was time to leave after all.

He sat with the rod across his lap while the sky darkened and the harbor stilled. He sat until he lost track of time, and when a flicker of blue-green danced across the waters he felt his heart catch in his throat. He could hear the song, too, if he listened for it. If he could just listen for it. And somehow, that ghost could soothe him, could save him. But in the end, it was not the catch he longed for. No, it was simply the moon, rising up to lend its light to those quiet waters he contemplated daily.

Victorious, the stars at last poked through a dark velvet veil of sky, and Vlad Li Tam sighed at them. Perhaps tomorrow, he thought.

He rose, turned his back to the Ghosting Crests and made his way up the hill.

Chapter 3

Charles Charles spun the gears and listened to the low groan as the mirrors around his workroom moved on their tracks and bent more light onto the object upon his table.

The moon sparrow lay disassembled, its various pieces laid out for examination with the magnifying lens he held before his eye.

When Jin Li Tam and Isaak had awakened him just after sunrise, he'd thought perhaps one of the mechanicals had broken down during the night's work. He'd pulled on his robes and met them at the locked door of his subbasement workroom.

He wondered now, hours later, if they had seen his face grow pale when he saw the little messenger. Or if they had noticed a catch in his voice. Or the trembling in his fingers as he sought the tiny reset switch beneath that one small feather that felt slightly rougher than its other silver companions.

Fortunately, their questions had been few and he'd managed to deflect them under the guise of getting to work to find answers for them.

Charles lifted the tiny firestone that powered the bird. It was the size of a grape, burning white but without heat that he could feel through the thumb and forefinger that gripped it and held it beneath his eye. With his thumbs, he carefully pressed it into the bird's silver chassis and used tweezers to carefully hook the long golden wires that led from it to the memory scroll casing. The casing had been punctured by what he assumed must be the kin-raven's talon or beak. It was a small puncture-and precise.

Where have you been off to? Biting his lower lip, he found the switch and moved the bird's wings and feet farther from its torso and head, as if somehow it might reattach them itself when it saw that it could not flee. When his callous fingertips found it, the bird's tiny red eyes flickered open and it started humming in the palm of his hand.

When the hum reached its highest pitch, Charles held the bird even closer to his face and whispered into its small audio receivers. "Authorize, Charles," he said, "arch-engineer, School of Mechanical Studies." He listened to the chirruping and waited until it subsided. "Report, scroll unwind five oh three. Backtrack flightpath to point of origin for confirmation of navigational accuracy."

The small beak opened, and a voice trickled out. It was his own, from years ago, and it caught him off guard. Though certainly, he remembered the days he'd spent speaking to the little birds they'd found within their little cages, giving them a language they had not previously known. "Report unavailable," his own voice told him, tinny

and sounding far away.

"Confirm authorization," he said, feeling his brow furrow and feeling his curiosity melting into something more pronounced, more anxious. These birds had not required much in the way of maintenance. Androfrancine archaeologists had dug them out, still functioning in their cages, from the ruined subbasement of one of the Wizard King's palaces in the Old World. But still, they were complex mechanicals of a time that dated back beyond even the Age of the Wizard Kings. He'd learned what he could of them and had even found obscure reference to them in Rufello's notes on the golden birds that ancient scientist had managed to bring back into the world.

It had taken Charles years, but he'd learned enough about them to eventually offer them up to the Office of the Holy See as an improved means of communication, particularly in the Churning Wastes where the living message birds lost their magicks and their direction.

"Authorization unconfirmed."

Unconfirmed? Charles let his held breath out through his nose, watching the force of his exhalation move the moon sparrow's soft silver feathers. He could remember establishing the authorizations for these particular messengers. He'd updated them just months before his apprentice betrayed him and destroyed Windwir. He paused a moment, trying to reach back into his memory to find the correct query language. "Emergency protocol, unwind scroll four, six, two: Destination?"

With the slightest pop, his voice vanished and another-this one reedy and metallic-slipped out of the bird's open beak. "Mechoservitor Three, Ninefold Forest Houses, Seventh Forest Manor, Library."

He thought about asking again, thought even that perhaps he could find other hidden paths within the Whymer Maze of its tiny memory casing. Some back path that might tell him where the bird had come from. They'd used moon sparrows as a part of the Sanctorum Lux project, along with other similar endeavors that required something more reliable than an organic bird or a person. The birds were small, fast and-until now-had not encountered anything that could successfully stop them.

Charles heard the heavy footfalls outside his door, heard the slightest wheeze of bellows and hum of gears from where the mechoservitor waited. He put down the small mechanical and stood from his stool, stretching the muscles that threatened to knot his shoulders and neck.

He was opening the door just as the robed mechoservitor raised a metal hand to knock. "Good afternoon, Isaak."

Isaak's eye shutters flashed open and closed. Steam slipped out from the back of his robe, where he'd carefully cut away the fabric

around his exhaust grate. "Good afternoon, Father."

Father. Until recently, Charles had never considered himself truly a parent. Certainly, he'd joked often enough about his mechanical creations and re-creations being his children, but he'd come to the Order as a young zealot from the Emerald Coasts. At that age, with the precepts and gospels of P'Andro Whym so near his tongue and matters of the flesh so far out of mind, he couldn't even comprehend the act that might lead to fatherhood. And throughout his tenure in the Order, he'd stayed that course.

Now, however, a machine he had built, assembled based on Rufello's Book of Specifications, had grown unexpectedly into something capable of regarding him as its father. The notion of it staggered him, though if he were completely honest, there were also days he still doubted it despite his own experience.

"Good afternoon, Isaak," he said, inclining his head toward the metal man. He'd told him many times that he could call him Charles or even Brother Charles if he preferred. Each time, Isaak had suggested that his preference was to call him Father.

For a moment, Isaak stood still and the awkwardness of the moment played out. Finally, his amber eyes flashed again. "May I speak with you?"

Charles motioned for him to come in. "I'm nearly finished with our little friend."

Isaak entered and waited while Charles closed the door behind him. Then, he followed the arch-engineer back to the workbench and watched over his shoulder while he took up the magnifying glass once again. The bellows filled, and Isaak's reedy voice resonated in the room. "Were you able to learn anything about its point of origin or the message it bears?"

Charles shook his head. "I'm… unauthorized for those things." The word felt distasteful in his mouth. "But Lady Tam is correct: Its message is for you." He looked back to Isaak.

The mechoservitor blinked, turning its head slowly to the left and right. Charles had noticed that Isaak did that when he was accessing deeper lines within his memory scrolls. "There was a matter of authorization prior to your arrival in the Churning Wastes," Isaak said. "At the bridge where we encountered the mechoservitor that later ended his operational effectiveness."

"This is the instance where the boy, Nebios, was authorized access but you and the Waste guide were not?"

"Yes, Father."

Charles moved the magnifying glass, shifting so that the metal man could see him but also so that the towering figure did not block his light. "More of the mystery," he said. "But we've had a triple

helping of mystery. Do you want to hear your message, instead?"

Amazing, he thought, how easy it was to see the mechanical as a child of sorts. He heard a child's hesitation now in the whine of the mouth flaps as they opened and closed. He waited until Isaak finally spoke. "I would like to ask you a question first."

Charles put the bird down and turned to face the metal man. "Ask, Isaak."

"What level of malfunction would be necessary for a mechoservitor to practice active deception, and can it be corrected?"

The spell again. Rudolfo had briefed him early on about it, of course, and Charles understood why. The spell trapped inside of this device could, in the wrong hands, bring down the world around them. It had razed Windwir. Two thousand years earlier, Xhum Y'Zir's death choir of similar mechanicals had sung the spell and brought about the Age of Laughing Madness and the end of the Old World. And as much as he understood why Rudolfo had made him the third person-the fourth if they counted Isaak-to know that the spell had survived, he also understood why Rudolfo had warned him to let Isaak bring the knowledge to him in the metal man's own time.

Charles sighed and wondered if real children had better-timed curiosity than their mechanical counterparts. "I think it depends upon the deception. Not all deceptions are a result of malfunction. Some may be a highly analytical outgrowth of careful thought regarding the better choice when no choice is truly optimal."

He watched Isaak now while the metal man thought about this. "But wouldn't that contradict a mechanical's scripting?"

Charles shrugged. "It could. But other scripting could call for that contradiction-or untested circumstances could alter the scripting in some way." He paused. "And I know it seems incorrect on the surface, but sometimes deceptions are carried out for love, for safety, for any number of noble purposes."

"I can see logic in that," Isaak said, his tinny voice taking on a matter-of-fact tone. "Still, it perplexes me."

Tell me. He bent his will toward the metal man. He would not ask the reason why. But in the end, he did. "What brings this question about, Isaak?"

Now watch, Charles told himself.

A gout of steam shot from Isaak's exhaust grate. Deep in his chest cavity, gears whined and springs clacked with enough violence that his metal plating shook for a moment. A low whine built, noticeable, but quieter than the last time Charles had heard him lie. "I was simply curious."

Charles bit his tongue and turned his gaze back to the moon sparrow. He attached first one wing, then the other. "Well, I hope your

curiosity is satisfied."

The next sound from Isaak made Charles jump. It sounded unnatural, but it was obvious. Isaak had chuckled. "I doubt my curiosity shall ever be satisfied, Father."

Now it was Charles's turn to chuckle. "I think you may be right." Then his thumb found the switch beneath that out-of-place feather. "But for now, let's bend our curiosity towards your message."

The bird fluttered to its feet. Its small beak opened, and the tinny voice of a faraway mechoservitor echoed into the workroom. "Addressee," it said, "Mechoservitor Three, Ninefold Forest Houses, Seventh Forest Manor, Library."

Charles looked to Isaak. "I am Mechoservitor Three, also called Isaak," the metal man said in a quiet voice. "Chief Officer of the Forest Library."

The tiny bird twitched slightly in his cupped hand, and when the stream of numbers hissed out they were too fast for Charles to identify them. Their pitch and tone warbled, and the old arch-engineer was impressed with what that told him. Numeric code with inflection markers to show emphasis and vary definition. When he was younger, if he'd had the luxury of months, he might've parsed out the code with a forest of paper and an ocean of ink. And yet, he watched Isaak's flashing eyes and saw his fingers spasm as he deciphered the code as it was given.

It was a mighty thing, Charles decided, to watch something he had made with his own two hands do something in seconds that he would need most of a season to accomplish.

Isaak looked to the bird and then to Charles, his mouth flap opening and closing as if he meant to say something.

Then, the metal man snatched the moon sparrow from Charles's fingers and fled. In his haste, he tipped over a chair and forgot to close the door behind him. All the while, he whispered to the bird, cupping it near his mouth.

Charles leapt to his feet and ran into the hall, his heart hammering in his temples. The last mechanical he'd seen move this fast was the one he'd scripted to escape from Erlund and bear his message to the Order. Both times, he tasted fear at the daunting machinery he had constructed. "Stop him," he cried.

But before anyone could react, Isaak had thrown open the doors and flung his silver messenger into the sky.

Then, Isaak turned to Charles, bellows chugging with grief and surprise.

"I'm sorry, Father," his metal child said. Neb Neb ran though the rest of the day and long into the night before he made camp to give his body at least a few hours of sleep away from the black root that

fueled it. As he ran beneath the moon, he heard the crescent's song increase in volume, and he bent his mind to that cipher. As he slept beneath that same moon, he cradled the sliver of silver to his ear to dream music and numbers and light.

At one point, in his deepest dreaming, he thought he heard his father's voice calling to him beneath the melody of the canticle. He stirred, cast about for some memory of Winters with her long, dirty brown hair, her muddy face with its big brown eyes. But when he found nothing, he let the song enfold him and carry him back down into sleep.

By noon on his second day alone, he skirted the ruins of Y'leris, a scattering of mounded wreckage and glass that had melted and then cooled in twisted, razor-edged hills.

He would have kept south if it weren't for the commotion.

At first, he thought it might be kin-wolves hunting, but that made no sense. They hunted only at night and slept by day unless something disturbed them. Renard had shown him-very carefully-how to look for the spoor and avoid the dens of these fiercely territorial predators of the Churning Wastes. And with the sun at its highest point and the sky ribboned with waves of heat, he knew they could not be hunting.

He stood at the edge of the ruins and listened to the howls and snarls warble through the glass-and-steel Whymer Maze. He hefted his thorn rifle and felt the bulb for freshness. He frowned at what his fingers felt and quickly wet a small cotton wad with water, then pushed it up into the bottom of the thorn bulb. Then he dug into his pouch to find one of the vials of kin-wolf urine he and Renard had traded for last month.

Their snarls intensified, and one kin-wolf yelped.

What are they up to? He counted four distinct wolves. And they were perhaps a league or two into the heart of the city. Neb tried to shake off his curiosity, bending his mind to the south, where the shell of Sanctorum Lux and Rudolfo's expedition of Gypsy Scouts awaited.

But the girl's scream, blood-chilling and long, clinched his decision. Neb swallowed the bitter root juice, raised his thorn rifle, and ran into the ruins toward the sound.

His feet moved easily over the debris and scattered stones. Overhead, the sun beat down; and within the city, the varied colors of twisted glass threw a rainbow of light against the shadows, lending it an unearthly quality. Even as he increased his speed, Neb's nostrils flared and his eyes moved over the ground ahead of him, looking for sign. Still, he didn't need it. The noise of the commotion deeper in the city was enough to guide him true.

When he came upon the makeshift camp, strong with the scent of kin-wolf urine, he stopped and drew his vial. It took only a few drops,

but once this new aroma found the wind, it proclaimed a rival wolf laying claim to this marked territory. He sprinkled the drops and moved forward slowly.

The camp was in shambles. The blanket was shredded, the small cooking pot overturned and the remnants of a smallish fire scattered. Quickly, his eyes took in what they'd been trained to take in. A sling lay discarded amid a scattering of silver bullets, and a knife belt, its sheaths empty, lay near a pair of small boots made from the skin of some kind of lizard or snake.

No time to linger here. Neb skirted the camp, the snarls louder just to the west of him. As he drew closer, he also heard the ragged rasp of labored breathing.

Now, he moved slowly, the rifle up and ready. A hot wind picked up behind him. It would carry his scent forward to the pack, but this didn't alarm him much. It would also bear the markings of the white kin-wolf.

There were four of them-one male, two females and a pup. They circled a low mound of rubble, growling and snapping at it. Beneath the rubble, Neb saw occasional flashes of light as a knife blade darted out. Just as the kin-wolves stopped and looked in the direction of the breeze, Neb raised his thorn rifle and sighted in on the largest of them. He flexed the bulb and heard the slight cough as the needle-sized thorn launched from the long lacquered tube to bury itself in the right shoulder of the male kin-wolf. He squeezed again and put another in its side as its yelp became a snarl and the wolf launched himself at Neb.

Fire and flee. Renard's words from months of hunting the Wastes came back now, and Neb embraced them. The snarl of the wolves and the sudden smell of them, heavy and sour, brought the taste of copper to his mouth and threatened his balance. Still, he moved as quickly as the root would allow him, all the while counting the seconds. Spinning, he fired another thorn at one of the females now also in pursuit, but the shot went wide and the thorn clattered off a bent wave of purple glass.

He saw a mound ahead and gathered speed to leap for it, glancing quickly over his shoulder. Behind him, the male was already faltering as the thorn's sap worked its way quickly into his bloodstream. And only one of the females pursued; the other stayed near the pup and cornered prey.

Neb leaped to a round boulder of black glass, then scrambled onto the mound of rusted steel and spun around. The female was close behind him. Firing blindly, he put three thorns into her face and breast as she pounced for him. Behind her, the male had collapsed into a whimpering, twitching pile of matted fur.

Yelping, she scrambled over the glass, then onto the mound itself, her teeth bared. Neb smelled the carrion on her breath. Kicking out with one booted foot, he discarded the rifle and drew a single scout knife from his belt. He felt his hands slick with sweat, and though the black root increased his strength and stamina, he could hear his own ragged breathing as it reverberated through the desolate city.

The kin-wolf threw back her head and howled, eyes wild, and launched herself at him anew. She caught his boot in her mouth and wrenched his leg, knocking him over with enough force to drive the wind from him, but even as she climbed over the top of him, he slid the knife into her soft underside and twisted, forcing her snout away from him with a forearm against her matted throat.

Neb withdrew the knife and stabbed again, the sharp teeth closer and closer to his face as the sheer weight of the beast crushed him. He felt the claws moving over him, tearing his clothing and skin, as the kin-wolf scrambled to regain advantage. Eyes wide, Neb felt his bladder threatening to cut loose and felt the sticky wetness of blood. Still, he stabbed again and willed the sap to do its work.

Finally, the kin-wolf slowed and then became still, her wheezing and whimpers all the fight that remained in her. Neb crawled from beneath her, recovered his rifle, and climbed down to what had once been a street. Quickly, he checked himself, and when he saw that most of the blood was from the wolf, he released a sigh that felt more like a sob. Then, he tipped back his head and voiced the howl that Renard had taught him. The sound of it raised the hair on the back of his own neck.

When he reached the other mound, the remaining kin-wolf snarled at him, sniffed at the blood upon the wind, and turned suddenly to flee with her cub following after.

"They're gone now," he told the mound. "You can come out."

He heard words, quiet and mumbled, but could not understand them. Drawing closer, he lowered his rifle again, pointing it loosely toward the mound. The Wastes were not a place for trust.

"You're a long way from home, whoever you are," he said again. This time, there was silence.

Moving in, he saw a still form wedged tightly into a crack in the mound. A long, slender arm hung loose, a bloody knife dangling from limp fingers. Crouching, he approached until he could see the rest of the woman. She wore tattered silk clothes and was barefoot. Her left arm was bloody and mangled from the shoulder to the wrist where the wolves' teeth had ravaged her in an effort to drag her free. And her high cheekbones and close-cropped red hair carried a familiarity that he could not place immediately in context. Her small breasts rose and fell with her ragged breathing, and her eyelids twitched.

Neb noticed all of this, but he also noticed more, and it both surprised and frightened him with its sudden intensity after so long away from home.

She was beautiful beyond measure.

Kicking her knife aside, he set himself to pulling her out of the shadows and into the light of the afternoon sun, where he could better see her wounds.

There, the light did its work and Neb gasped at the fine lattice of scars that spiderwebbed her alabaster skin.

Old scars forming old symbols more terrifying to him than an ocean of kin-wolves. Rudolfo The invitations went out quietly, and one by one, Rudolfo's guests slipped into the private dining room of his Seventh Forest Manor. It was a comfortable room, paneled in dark oak offset with silk tapestries from the Emerald Coasts and carpeted with the finest Pylosian rugs. The fireplace lay unlit but ready. The long table filled as Jin Li Tam, Aedric and the others took their places at it. Most, including Isaak, were frequent guests here-nights spent with laughter and wine-but tonight was a night for quiet conversation.

The moon was up, and if the windows had been open, they'd have heard the frogs of second summer. But they were closed, as were the doors, and Gypsy Scouts had been posted to assure that no ears could hear this private dinner.

Rudolfo waited until the house servants replaced the cheese platters with bowls of steaming roast duck, wild rice, forest mushrooms and fresh carrots. Then, after the wineglasses were refilled, the servants left and pulled the doors closed behind them. He looked to Winters and then to Isaak. "We have guests coming from the west and from the east?"

Isaak's eye shutters flapped. "Not guests as such, Lord Rudolfo-"

Before he could finish, Rudolfo raised his hand, cutting him off. "I'm being facetious, Isaak." He looked to the metal man and let the frustration show in his voice. "And you released this so-called moon sparrow without first consulting me?" He'd never felt disappointment toward the metal man before now. Still, alongside that disappointment, a suspicion nudged him. Something about the code in the message had brought about this reaction in Isaak. It had to be so. Isaak would not do such a thing of his own volition.

A machine with volition. After two years of… what? He struggled to find the word. Friendship. After two years of friendship with the mechoservitor, Rudolfo was surprised. Regardless, once he'd turned the bird loose with his reply, the metal man had immediately sought audience with his Gypsy King.

"I did. I do not know what came over me. I felt compelled." Isaak hung his head. "I'm sorry, Lord Rudolfo."

Rudolfo felt a stab of guilt at the sight of the metal man's remorse and looked to Charles. "Could the code have compromised his scripting somehow?"

The old man nodded. "A code within the code, I suspect. Something to compel response if the message was received."

Rudolfo stroked his beard. A message, given by a metal bird to a metal man, that could compel behavior? This was alarming. And equally alarming: Some or all of the mechoservitors who had fled Sanctorum Lux were even now approaching from the east, requesting his aid. He imagined them moving across the Churning Wastes, steam billowing from their exhaust grates as they ran at top speed, amber eyes bobbing like fireflies in the night. "What do they seek?"

He'd asked the question more to himself, though he knew their stated purpose. But Isaak still answered. "They seek sanctuary and safe escort to the northwestern edge of the Ninefold Forest," he said. But he rattled and hissed when he said it, and Rudolfo glanced quickly toward Charles. The arch-engineer stared, tight-lipped, at his creation, and Rudolfo noted that he would need to ask about that look when he and Charles were next alone.

"And from our western neighbors?" Rudolfo looked to Winters. He'd seen enough of her these last few months that the mud and ash she once wore upon her face was a faded memory. Now, she was a young woman of coltlike awkwardness and uncomfortable silences, pretty but unaware of her prettiness at this intersection between childhood and womanhood. "Your kin-raven prophesies danger against Jakob and claims Machtvolk ambassadors are en route to warn us and offer aid?"

She glanced to Jin Li Tam and Jakob in the corner of the room. "It's what the bird said. Yes." She dropped her eyes. "I do not trust it."

Rudolfo chuckled, but there was no humor it. "I suspect none of us do. Trust is not a commodity we can afford in our present economy."

Machtvolk ambassadors, renegade mechoservitors and Y'Zirite evangelists in the Ninefold Forest. Rudolfo felt the stabbing ache of a days-old headache revisiting his temples. "What are we doing to prepare?" As he asked, he took up a piece of warm bread and broke it open, finding no satisfaction in the smell of it, and turned to the first captain of his Gypsy Scouts.

Aedric cleared his voice, putting down his wineglass. "I've tripled the watch on the manor and stepped up scout recruitment. We've been thinned by war, by maintaining the gate, and now this work in the Wastes. Have you considered calling up the local regiments?"

Rudolfo nodded. "I have… and will if necessary." But he did not wish to if he could avoid it. Twice in as many years, his Wandering

Army had surged forth from their forest homes. Fathers, sons, brothers all leaving their families behind to serve their king.

And their queen, he thought. While he'd scoured the sea to find her family, Jin Li Tam had become the second queen in Forester history to raise the Wandering Army and lead them into war. "I would prefer not to call them if it can be avoided. They've spent too many months away from home and hearth these two years."

Rudolfo looked to Lysias and saw the storm brewing on his face. He wants to speak but is choosing not to, he realized.

In the past months, the man had proven invaluable to the Ninefold Forest. Initially, Rudolfo had felt skeptical about the man's loyalties, having fought against him in the war that followed Windwir's fall. But the general's daughter, Lynnae, had served as Jakob's nursemaid during his illness, and from the time Lysias first sought asylum with the Gypsies, he'd given himself fully to whatever task fell to him. Most recently, he'd organized the Refugee Quarter and had devised a system of employing and housing the sudden influx of residents in the various towns of the Ninefold Forest and had created a constabulary among them. "What are your thoughts on these matters, Lysias?"

Lysias looked around the room. Rudolfo watched the older man make eye contact with Aedric before speaking.

When he looked back to the Gypsy King, his eyes were hard. "I intend no disrespect, Lord Rudolfo, but your world has suddenly changed, and you have not changed quickly enough to keep up with it."

Rudolfo raised a glass of chilled pear wine and paused midway to his lips. "Explain."

Lysias glanced around the room and put down his own glass. "The days of riding your forest circuit of houses have passed. Your seventh manor is now your capital, home of the new library and the center of the Named Lands. The days of being overlooked and unnoticed are behind your people. Refugees roll in from neighboring lands in disarray and you do not turn them back. Laborers and students and wayward scholars follow them, hoping to build a better life near this new light you cast-you do not turn them back, either."

Rudolfo swallowed his mouthful of wine. "We will not turn them back," he said, feeling his earlier frustration build toward anger. "The Ninefold Forest has ever been a haven for those who've sought it."

Lysias locked eyes with him now. "You could not turn them back even if you wished to, Lord. You have no real control of your borders. Scouts on broad patrol, scattered watch posts poorly manned. These evangelists slip in through the gaps. These metal men"-here he looked to Isaak-"they will come and go as they please as well. As will anyone

else who wishes." He lowered his voice. "You have enemies, Lord, who can place their so-called Blood Scouts any place at any time, and as good as your men are… they are not good enough. More than that, you've heard it from Tam himself and that fox Petronus-there's more trouble on the rise, and I fear it's looking for us. We're being hemmed, Rudolfo, with wolves on the prowl beyond our ken." Lysias reached for the bread and tore off a piece, holding it up. "And already, your resources are stretched like a thimble of butter over a mountain of rye."

Aedric's face was red with anger, and he started to stand. "You can't-"

Rudolfo raised his hand. "It's fine, Aedric."

He knew the words were true. Certainly, his Wandering Army was the fiercest group of fighters in all the Named Lands, but these were men with homes and farms and families to tend. They were never intended to maintain borders or operate in a constant climate of vigilance and conflict. He looked at Lysias now with narrowing eyes. "You would not say this if you did not also have a solution."

The old general nodded. "It is time," he said, "for the Ninefold Forest to join the rest of the Named Lands." And Rudolfo knew the words that were coming; he dreaded them and winced as Lysias spoke them. "It is time for you to outfit a standing army and establish a firm and permanent presence both within the forest around your assets and along your borders."

Rudolfo glanced to Jin Li Tam where she sat. She looked away, but not before he saw agreement in her eyes. She'd suggested the same to him not long after they'd returned from the Council of Kin-Clave, and it had led to the first strong argument in their marriage. Her mouth was tight now.

He looked from her to the child in the built-up pine chair beside her. He, too, wore his green turban of office and his rainbow-colored scarves of rank.

Change, he remembered, is the path life takes. But at what point did that change rob life of its value? A standing army in the Ninefold Forest? A kept and guarded border? It was far beyond the life he'd inherited from his father and his father's father before him. It smacked of everything they'd disdained about their joyless neighbors, everything they'd vowed they would leave in the Old World when they'd left its ashes and madness behind them.

What are you inheriting, my little late-coming prince?

Rudolfo sighed and finally spoke. "I do not wish it-and I do not accept that it is the only answer." He paused, stared at the food on his plate that he knew he would not eat. When he looked up again, he glanced first to Aedric. In the young captain's fuming, Rudolfo saw the

boy's father, Gregoric, in the tightly clenched jaw and the narrow eyes. Then, he turned to Lysias. "Draw up the plans for it. But it is to be kept secret at all costs. Our kin-claves are tenuous at best, and this is not the Gypsy way." Even as he spoke, his hands moved in the sign language of House Y'Zir. Work with him, Aedric.

Aedric did not answer at first. Then, his hand moved, though with reluctance. Yes, General.

Now Jin Li Tam's face was troubled. Do not ask me, Rudolfo willed, but she did it anyway, her fingers moving along the side of her wineglass. Are you certain, love?

Rudolfo stood and looked to her, hoping his eyes would not betray his answer. "I beg your forgiveness," he said. "Please excuse me."

Then, turning, he left the dining room. He stepped quickly past the Gypsy Scouts assigned to guard him, ducked around a corner and slipped into one of dozens of passages kept hidden for just these reasons. He walked at a brisk pace along the narrow corridors and slipped through a hidden door into the garden.

His Whymer Maze towered in the moonlight, and the frogs raised their voice to the blue-green moon. Looking over his shoulder to be sure none followed him, he moved past the maze and into a copse of trees he rarely visited these days.

There, near a white stone marked simply with three names, he sat upon a marble meditation bench that none had sat upon for decades. After a long silence, he finally spoke, and it was the voice of a frightened boy.

"Father," he said to the stone, "I do not know this path."

Then, in silence, Rudolfo sat still and begged answer from the ground of Jakob's Rest.

Chapter 4

Petronus Petronus raised his eyebrows and looked at the man who rocked to and fro before him. "So what you're proposing"-he glanced to the report from Grymlis in his hands, looking for the name once more-"Geoffrus, is it?" At the man's hurried nod, Petronus continued. "What you're proposing is that you and your company of men supply our entire outpost with hunting, trapping and scouting services for-" He scanned the report again, but the numbers ran together into a blur. "Well," he finally said, "for significant barter, primarily in metal goods and fabrics from the other side of the gate."

Geoffrus nodded. "Yes, Luxpadre. I-or I should say we-are prepared to execute on a time-is-of-the-essence basis, immediately, that is, to give you and your Ash-Men the best our Madding Lands can offer."

Petronus sat back in the wooden chair and rubbed his eyes. Here in the shade, the afternoon sun still kept the day warmer than comfortable for his tastes, accustomed more to the cool seaborne breezes on Caldus Bay than the hot wind of the Churning Wastes. Already, his robe was damp from sweat, though the man across the table from him looked dry and comfortable.

The Waster was a slight man, dressed in tattered clothing shored up with patches and bits of leather. He'd sought audience at least three times before over the past several months, and Petronus had managed to hold the meeting at bay. But finally, he'd relented and agreed to see the man when it became obvious that this Geoffrus was not going to pick up on the subtle social cue of disinterest Petronus had attempted.

Petronus offered a weak smile. "I'm certain your offer is very generous, Geoffrus."

The man beamed, the black root stains showing on his teeth. "You will not find more generous terms and conditions, Luxpadre."

Petronus went back to the report and found Grymlis's scribbled note. "Yes, I'm sure of it," he said, "but there is the matter of what game you intend to provide us? As you no doubt know, the Ninefold Forest keeps us well provisioned, to include game."

Geoffrus nodded again, this time with added vehemence. "Yes, yes, the contract is flexible in that regard, of course, to provide you and yours with the finest selection our significant and highly desirable skills might provide. Such succulent tasties as the Rainbow-Men could not imagine."

Petronus knew better, of course. He and Grymlis had gone over his report earlier that morning. The men he'd sent into Fargoer's

Station had gathered every bit of information they could on this part of the world, including what scraps could be found on this Geoffrus and his small band of Waste thieves. He already knew the rumors. People who trusted these particular men tended to disappear. He wondered what further information Isaak might be able to send him from the archived records of the Office of Expeditionary Unction-but also knew that that knowledge wasn't necessarily worth the effort when he already knew his answer. "I'm certain that you are highly skilled," he said. "Though to be perfectly honest, we do not require your services at this time." Then, he smiled. "However, I am deeply gratified by your proposal. I recognize that you've gone to enormous efforts on our behalf, with nothing but our best interests in mind."

Geoffrus grinned again. "Aye, we have. Aye, we have," he said, repeating himself quickly.

Petronus returned the smile. "Therefore, I am pleased to offer you and yours tokens to assure you of our gratitude." He motioned, and a young Androfrancine approached, carrying a haphazard pile of folded fabric.

As the tattered Waster took in the armful of cloth his eyes went wide along with the smile. "This is indeed most generous of you, Luxpadre."

"Ask him about the runners in the Wastes."

Petronus looked up at the nearby voice, recognizing it but not placing it. "I'm sorry?"

Geoffrus said nothing. Beside him, the young man with the cloth also remained silent.

Petronus looked around to see who else could have spoken, but other than these two, no one else stood close enough. Still, the voice was one he knew. When had he heard it last?

He felt the blood drain from his face when the memory found him. You heard it yesterday, old man.

Suddenly, he wanted very much to leap up from the table and flee but forced himself to stay. A new smell filled his nose, driving out the acrid scent of the hot wind and the dried sweat of the unwashed man before him. No, it was roses and lavender he smelled now, as a summer breeze caught the aroma of his gardens and wafted them into his office window, and-

Petronus blinked, forcing himself back to the conversation. "These," he said, "are a gift. But I can offer you something even finer in exchange for a bit of information."

Geoffrus looked to the stack of cloth and then back to Petronus. "What finer?" he asked. "What information?"

Petronus drew in his breath. "What do you know about runners in the Wastes?"

Geoffrus's eyes narrowed. "Ash-Men do not run. Rainbow-Men run. Renard runs." At the man's name, he spit in the dirt. "And Geoffrus runs." He licked his lips. "What finer for me and mine?"

Petronus closed his eyes, only for a moment, but when he opened them the world had bent and twisted away. Once more he sat in his papal office. Outside, the smell of summer was heavy from the gardens below.

He looked back to the table, and now, across from him, sat the man he'd seen the day before. He was bent over a large map that was spread out, and Petronus saw it was a map of the Churning Wastes. "Intelligence is problematic, of course," the man said, "but we're aware of runners here, here and here." Each time, he pointed to a different section of the map with a chewed pencil. "They are magicked. We suspect blood magicks, though they do not appear constrained in the same way that the Marshers have been."

Petronus blinked again and tried to recall where he'd been just now. There had been heat. And smell, though nothing quite as lovely as roses on the wind. "Who are you?" he asked.

The man looked up, his eyes hollow. "We suspect they're looking for the same thing we are, but it could be worse than that."

"And what are we looking for, exactly?"

The man studied Petronus before answering. "We're looking for the mechoservitors," he finally said.

Mechoservitors. The word held meaning for him, but in this context he could not find it. Still, something the man had said registered with him suddenly, and a new question spilled out before he could stop himself. "And if it's worse?"

"If it is worse, then they're looking for the Homeseeker."

Another familiar word that he could not place, and Petronus glanced back to the map. Here, here and here. He felt something like an ocean swell pulling him back, and he closed his eyes against the sudden feeling of vertigo that seized him.

This time, when he opened them again, he was lying on his back while hands held him down and still. He struggled at first until he saw Grymlis's worried face as he knelt over him.

Somewhere in the distance, he heard Geoffrus ranting and hooting. "Luxpadre has the madness," he cried. "Luxpadre has the madness."

Petronus opened his mouth to speak but found no words, but the Gray Guard captain must have read the questions in his eyes. "You're fine now," Grymlis said. "You fell over." Here, his brow furrowed with worry. "You were convulsing, babbling. Nothing coherent." His voice lowered. "I think it was glossolalia."

Petronus winced. Ecstatic utterance. Taking a deep breath, he

forced himself to lie still and recollect himself.

Where had he been? He vaguely remembered a voice and a map. Here, here and here.

He dug at the memory, pried at it, and found nothing but noise that hurt his head and made the afternoon light unbearable. One final tug and he found the recollection he sought.

"Runners in the Wastes," he said, his tongue heavy in his mouth. He nodded to Geoffrus. "Ask him. Pay him."

Grymlis squeezed his shoulder. The firm hand felt reassuring to Petronus. "I'll see to it, Father. After we get you to your cot."

Petronus wanted to protest, wanted to insist that he not be carried to bed as if he were a child. But as he opened his mouth, he suddenly felt the dampness of his robes, and the heat of shame flushed his face. His bladder had cut loose during the fit.

Hoping no one would see that he'd wet himself, the Last King of Windwir let his ragged men lift him and carry him to his cot. Vlad Li Tam Vlad Li Tam awoke from too little sleep and sat up in his narrow bed. The windowless room offered no light, though he blinked and rubbed his eyes as if it might if only he were patient.

When they'd returned to find the island and its Blood Temple abandoned, he'd gone through the massive building assigning quarters to his family. He was careful to be sure that this room became his once again, though he wasn't sure exactly why. Perhaps it was an anchor to the pain of that time, something to keep the memory banked like a fire.

His recollection of those months was a blur of agony and terror. Nights spent huddled in the corner, sleeping fitfully, open-eyed with his back against the wall. And underlying those memories, Ria's voice-filled with love and comfort-as she worked her knife or as she sat at his table and conversed with him while he lay twitching upon the floor.

Other voices joined hers. The voices of his children beneath the knives, offering up their last words to him as he watched, echoing long after their final breath as he waited here for the next day's cutting.

My room.

He'd memorized it during his clearer moments, and that served him well now as he stood and pulled on his light cotton trousers and shirt. Barefoot, he padded to the door and let himself into the empty hallway.

He'd spent another day on the dock, fishing but not catching. At the end of the day, he'd discovered his bait had been taken at some point without his knowledge.

Still, he'd not been fishing for fish.

This afternoon, he'd force himself away and back to the paper-strewn table in his room. Back to the book his father had written and passed to Vlad's first grandson, a secret history devised to bring down Windwir and establish a lasting Y'Zirite resurgence in the Named Lands. The plot was as carefully conceived as any Tam intrigue-perhaps even more so given that the network of conspirators stretched far beyond his family, into other families, into the Marshlands, and even into the very heart of the Androfrancine Order itself.

Vlad had spent his life weaving a web he'd thought was his own design, only to learn it was a carefully crafted manipulation by the man he'd respected, feared and loved above all others.

A man who had conceived of this plot, knowing full well that the price of it would be the near extinction of his own bloodline.

Somewhere out there, other conspirators continued this work. He'd seen their ships at harbor here-ships unfamiliar to the Named Lands' most skilled family of shipwrights. Even now, his children scouted for them.

And yet all I can think about is the ghost.

He moved through the hallway slowly, listening to his feet as they whispered over the marble floor. When he reached the wide double doors, he pushed one open slowly to slip out into the moonlit night.

A young man separated himself from deeper shadows, silent on feet trained for scouting. "Good morning, Grandfather," the man said.

Vlad looked at him and tried to remember his name but couldn't. Before the cuttings, before his time here, he'd remembered every child, every grandchild and great-grandchild. Even those he lost along the way. He'd known their walk, their mannerisms, every little detail that might help him sharpen and fire them at the heart of the Named Lands as arrows for his hunting.

But since his time here, he'd found that his memory faltered. As if I don't want to know.

"Good morning," he answered. "How goes the watch?"

The young man shrugged and smiled. "Quietly."

Vlad nodded. All of their watches had been quiet upon returning; still they set them. He looked down to the harbor, where one of his iron vessels sat at anchor. "I'm going fishing," he said.

The guard inclined his head and slipped back to where he'd waited before.

Vlad looked to the moon-it was high but not full yet, though its light still cast shadows. He looked to the water below and saw its reflection dancing upon the surface.

Following the wide stone stairs down to the docks, he collected his tackle in the bait shed at the bottom and nodded to another guard.

I've become obsessed. The thought struck him, and Vlad felt some

part of his old self stirring to life to examine this new realization. Standing apart from it, he saw clearly how unlike him this fixation was. He'd come here every day for months under the guise of fishing when he knew-and suspected his family knew, too-that he really was searching for ghosts in the water.

No, he thought, one ghost in particular. And today, after so many days of sitting and watching, it was time for a new tack.

Bucket, rod and tackle clutched tight, Vlad climbed down the wooden stairs to the lower docks and paused to take in the stillness of the predawn water. There, at the end of the lower dock, a skiff lay tied and ready. He walked to it, laid his tackle within, and climbed into the small boat.

As a boy on the Emerald Coast, he'd learned to sail at a young age. But growing up in House Li Tam left little room for those luxuries in the face of a first son's training. In the end, he'd picked up most of his nautical experience fishing with Petronus and his father during the year he'd spent with his family in Caldus Bay. Of course, these memories lay over sixty years behind him now. Still, his feet remembered themselves, and as he found his place upon the rowing bench, his hands found the wooden oars and knew their work.

"Grandfather?"

Vlad looked up toward the whispered voice upon the dock. "Yes?"

In the dim moonlight, he saw yet another guard emerge now from shadow. "May I find someone to row you?"

Vlad smiled to himself. It was a simple inquiry, but the statement beneath it was clear to him. You are Vlad Li Tam, lord of House Li Tam. You should not be rowing about the sea alone in a tiny skiff.

"No need," he said. He pointed to the mouth of the natural harbor. "I'll not go far out of sight." Still, he knew that once he put his back into the oars, a bird would flash back to their watch captain, who would in turn inform Baryk.

Protocol, of course, would be followed.

Dawn was hours away yet when the cracking of his back and shoulders joined the whisper of the oars into water and the creaking of the wooden boat. Overhead, stars throbbed heavy in a velvet sky and the slice of moon lent the faintest blue-green limn to the warm water. Careful to stay beyond eyeshot of the anchored iron ship and its own watch, Vlad took the skiff around the edge of the harbor and savored the feeling in his arms.

It wasn't until he cleared the mouth and turned south along the shoreline that he finally paused and blinked at the empty night around him.

Why am I here? He'd started slow. First, an hour at the dock. Then eventually, half of a day. And lately, it had been the full day.

Baryk and the others were handling the investigation and patrols, and Vlad knew they noted his increased withdrawal from that work. He even suspected that Baryk's desire to leave was driven in part by Vlad's gradual descent into this obsession.

Now, in the middle of the night, he found himself at sea. Months on the dock were no longer enough to satisfy his longing to see it again.

"Where are you?" he asked the waters in a quiet voice that frightened him.

And as if in answer, the water suddenly shimmered around him with a blue-green glow that stopped his breath.

Bringing the oars into the boat, Vlad carefully gripped the gunwale and leaned over the side. There, in the deeps, he saw it and felt the rush of joy and relief flooding him at the sight of it.

Ribbons of light twisted around an undulating, pulsing being that slowly ascended toward him. One tendril, long and slender as an arm, reached upward to float just beneath the surface, and Vlad felt the boat tip when he stretched out his own arm to let his fingers move across the water. The light withdrew, and he felt a pang of panic seize him.

Don't go.

And even as he thought it, that older part of him stirred again. What is this that you feel? It was deeper than memory, stronger than instinct, and it pulled at him with a gravity he had not expected. Still, he set it aside for now.

He forced his arm still, the hand dipping into the gentle waves, and beneath his skiff, the ghost moved in a widening circle, rolling as it did, before it shot southeast-a streak of light within the water.

Vlad opened his mouth to speak, but his voice caught in his throat. More than that, he realized-it was more a sob than a gasp, and that knowledge rattled him.

Don't go.

Fast as it had fled, the light returned, wavering beneath him again, and for the faintest moment, he felt the cool electric tingle as one tendril brushed his hand. It pulsated more urgently now, and a new compulsion seized him.

Hooking his foot under the rowing bench to anchor himself, Vlad stretched over the side of the boat to dip his face into the water, forcing his eyes open to take it all in.

Its song was everywhere around him, and the light drew nearer for a moment before fleeing again.

Vlad raised his head, drew in a deep lungful of air, and reimmersed himself.

He counted to five, and just as before, the ghost was back and all

around him. I could give myself to it, he thought. I could let go of the bench and join it here and never leave.

But even as he thought it, he knew it was not the path for him, despite deep longing. That part of him that had ruled House Li Tam with iron resolve, making and breaking the leaders and houses of the Named Lands, knew with certainty that something suspicious and ancient and more powerful than any compulsion he'd ever known now gripped him, and rather than being satisfied by at last finding what he sought, he was instead more curious and more compelled by this longing.

Withdrawing his face from the water, Vlad watched as the ghost once again fled southeast only to return. It means me to follow.

But he knew that for now, he wouldn't. For now, he had learned what he needed to and would return to the Blood Temple, take his breakfast, and meet with Baryk as soon as the warpriest was awake.

Tomorrow, he would return alone. He would do the same each day after. And in a week's time, he would gather what remained of his family and would sail southeast… though it made no sense to do so.

Yet I will do this.

It broke his heart open to set himself firmly again on the rowing bench. He felt that pulsating ache moving and twisting across the deep, dark waters of his recent losses and was surprised at the tears that now coursed his cheeks.

It is as if I am in love, Vlad Li Tam thought with a rising panic that threatened to capsize his understanding. Winters The young Gypsy Scout stationed near the door ushered Winters into Rudolfo's audience chamber just ahead of the prisoners, and she slid quietly into the chair provided for her in the corner of the room. Already, her stomach knotted at the thought of this afternoon's meeting. She'd sat through hours of interrogation that morning, breaking only for lunch. Rudolfo's questioning was skillful, even courteous, but what she heard from her people-what she saw upon their faces as they proclaimed it-chilled her.

She smoothed her plain dress and forced herself to watch when the women were brought in. Their hair was cut short, and the lines of ash and mud upon their faces were drawn in a more deliberate pattern, like the woman who claimed to be her older sister. Their feet were bare beneath the robes they wore. They walked with their heads held high and their shoulders back, and they met Rudolfo's eyes with their own, and with the confident smile of peers. They inclined their heads slowly and sat in the chairs he waved at.

"I hope," Rudolfo said to them, "you enjoyed your lunch."

They nodded, and the one who had kept silent through most of the morning session spoke. Winters stretched for her name. Tamrys.

"We are grateful for your hospitality, Lord Rudolfo."

Winters watched him nod slightly, watched his eyes slide to Aedric and then glance up toward her. "I am grateful for your cooperation," he said. "These are curious times."

"These are the times foretold," Tamrys assured him, and Winters heard the faith in her voice. It gave her pause.

How long had this resurgence cooked slowly among her people? How blind had she and the Council of Twelve been? Thinking of the council, she looked across the room and saw Seamus sitting quietly. When their eyes met briefly, she saw sadness in them, and she tried to find a similar sorrow within herself.

Tamrys continued. "We know that these are but the labor of a difficult birth. With the Child of Promise delivered, the road is made straight for the Age of the Crimson Empress."

All morning, as Rudolfo gently probed them with questions, Winters had listened to fragments of gospel and references to prophecy she had not heard before. And with each spoken word, she'd heard the belief in these women's voices and felt something stirring in her that heated her face and forced her hands into white-knuckled fists.

She forced her attention back to the conversation.

"Yes," Rudolfo said. "You have shared that with us. And I'm certain that you believe this to be so-I can see why one might. But it remains that bringing this"-he paused, and his brow furrowed as he looked for the best word-"faith into the Ninefold Forest is unacceptable."

Winters watched both of the women blink in surprise, then recover with knowing smiles and sly glances to one another. "It just hasn't been revealed to you yet, Lord Rudolfo." She heard love and conviction in their voices. "When it has, you'll understand your great part in this gospel and the tremendous grace visited upon your son and your line."

Rudolfo looked to her again, and Winters saw cunningness in his dark eyes. His hands moved, and she read the words quickly. Do you wish to speak to them? He'd asked during the morning, too, but she'd declined. Once more, she shook her head, and as she did, she saw Tamrys staring at her from the corner of her eye.

"You are Winteria the Younger," she said, starting to stand. "We did not recognize you without your markings of Home-longing." Gypsy Scouts slipped in from the edges of the room until a glance from Rudolfo and a whistle from Aedric stood them down. The other stood, too, and both bowed deeply. "We bear word to you from your sister, the Elder."

Winters felt the blush rise to her cheeks. "I do not recognize her

as my kin."

Tamrys smiled, and it was warm, genuine even. "You do not need to as yet. These things take time." She looked to Rudolfo. "May I approach her?"

He looked to Winters, and she wondered how wide her eyes had become even as his narrowed. He must have seen something there, because his voice was cautionary. "I'm not certain-"

Winters found her voice. "You may approach."

Under the watchful eye of the scouts, the Machtvolk evangelist walked slowly across the room. As she did, Winters stood and faced the woman.

The woman was tall, and when she gathered Winters into her arms, Winters felt the strength of the embrace and smelled the sweat and earth and ash of the woman. She felt warm lips upon her forehead, and then the mouth moved to her ear as the voice lowered to a whisper. "Little sister," Tamrys said, "come home to me and to joy."

Unexpected, the words-and the love within that voice-raised goose bumps upon her skin.

Then, with the message delivered, the evangelist inclined her head and returned to her seat.

The conversation continued beyond that. Rudolfo asked questions, and the answers, circular and cryptic, followed. She heard references to schools and shrines built; to an expansion of the Machtvolk presence into what had once been Windwir; and candid discussion of evangelists moving out across the Named Lands in their robes and mud and ash, preaching their new gospel.

But gradually, the words drifted someplace out of reach to Winters. As hard as she tried to, she could not escape that whispered voice and that firm embrace.

Little sister, come home to me and to joy.

And yet, this same woman-her older sister supposedly-had sent assassins out in the night to murder Hanric, the man who had raised her. And now, this new queen and her kind transformed her people into something that frightened Winters though she did not fully grasp why.

She remembered that day in the tent at the edge of spring and felt the rage washing through her as she surged forward with upraised axe. She felt shame rise to her cheeks at the memory of being so easily restrained and subdued. And she realized suddenly that she'd spent these last six months avoiding the truth of what had happened to her and how she'd responded, hiding in the basement of the new library pretending she was only a girl. Sudden tears threatened her now, and Winters felt her face grow even hotter as she resisted.

I gave up on my people.

She remembered Tertius and the nights he often read to her. One of her favorite stories had been "Jamael and the Kin-Wolves." He'd suggested it to her one night and had then been subjected to reading it again and again to her. And one day Jamael came home from the fields to find a kin-wolf in her sheepfold…

She looked at the two women again. The light in their eyes. The deep sense of passion in their voices. How many more were out there, even now, sharing this gospel and feeding this resurgence? They had brought down Windwir to bring this faith out of the shadows. They had butchered and resurrected Petronus to create this belief. They had cut their mark over the hearts of innocent children. And they had healed Jin Li Tam and Rudolfo's dying son with the blood of thousands.

She knew from her talks with Rudolfo and Jin Li Tam that this resurgence had been engineered, but now, for the first time, she saw that her people were also victims of this dark movement. They were being bent and twisted into the servants of this so-called Crimson Empress, and the thought of it awoke anger in her. These people were in her care, and she could not hide here and pretend otherwise.

Wolves in the fold, Jamael cried.

"Wolves in the fold," Winters whispered softly to herself.

And as if she heard, the evangelist Tamrys paused, turned to the girl and smiled at her.

Chapter 5

Rudolfo Rudolfo looked up as Jin Li Tam and Jakob entered the back of the room, suddenly apprehensive about the decision they had made over lunch. He looked from his wife to the two Machtvolk evangelists and last, to Winters. The girl had been quiet, and he had been unable to read the emotions that washed her face. Something had happened when the woman Tamrys had embraced her and passed on her older sister's message.

Something to be mindful of.

His eyes locked with Jin Li Tam's, and the shrewdness he saw there bolstered him. "Ah," he said with a flourish, rising to his feet. "May I present the Lady Jin Li Tam, daughter of House Li Tam and queen of the Ninefold Forest. And our heir, Lord Jakob."

The two evangelists first went very pale, then blushed as they scrambled to stand and turn.

They are surprised. Perhaps, Rudolfo thought, this is the right path after all.

They bowed deeply, and he did not need to see their faces in that moment to read the adoration written there. "G-great Mother," Tamrys said, stammering, "this is an unforeseen honor."

Now, the other spoke as well, and Rudolfo heard the sob catch in her throat. "And behold, the Child of Promise-hearty and hale by the grace of the Crimson Empress."

Or by dark design and blood sacrifice. Rudolfo felt himself frowning and forced a smile to his mouth. "Please join us, Lady Tam," he said, motioning to a chair nearby.

Jin Li Tam gave the evangelists a quick look, her face a calm mask. But underneath it, Rudolfo knew that rage seethed there. Certainly, the Y'Zirite blood magicks had saved Jakob's life, but it had cost countless others, her sisters and brothers lost upon the cutting tables while Jin's father was forced to watch the murder of his children and grandchildren on the island Rudolfo had rescued him from. He knew Jin's shame, but he knew that if he had been there, holding their gray and gasping son, he too would have fallen to his knees and begged for that cure once he knew it worked. He could not fault her.

But like her, the shame of it would chew him.

Now, he admired her placid, regal tone. "Thank you, Lord Rudolfo. We would be pleased to join you."

He waited until the women seated themselves. Their eyes kept moving to the child, adoration painted clearly upon their faces.

They truly do believe he is their Child of Promise. Rudolfo noted

this and set it apart to consider later. Then, he put his attention back upon his unusual guests. "I can see that my son is important to you," he said.

Their nods were enthusiastic, their smiles wide. "He is our promise that the Crimson Empress will soon come," Tamrys said. "The First Gospel of Ahm Y'Zir teaches us that clearly."

First Gospel. It piqued his curiosity. "I'm unfamiliar with it. Enlighten me."

Tamrys's eyes did not leave Jakob as she lowered her voice and recited it from memory. "And in the shadow of the Usurper's Pyre, a child of great promise shall be given as light in darkness, as hope in despair, and he shall make straight the arrival of his Crimson Empress as a bridegroom prepares for the feast." She glanced back to Rudolfo. "There are other passages," she said. "I would be happy to share them with you."

Rudolfo smiled. "Perhaps later." Then, he leaned forward. "As you can imagine, Jakob's safety is of great importance to me. I've word from your queen that he is in danger and that her ambassador approaches even now. What do you know of this?"

Tamrys looked back to the baby, then to her companion. Rudolfo watched the knowing glances pass between them and waited. "There have been prophecies of late," she finally said.

Rudolfo opened his mouth to ask for more detail but closed it. Something suddenly felt wrong, and the hair rose on the back of his neck. He smelled something-it was earthy and rich with just a hint of apples. And the slightest breeze whispered against his cheek. He glanced to Aedric and opened his mouth again, then felt fingers pressing into the back of his neck.

Be still. Say nothing.

Rudolfo waited. The fingers were warm and small. He felt the slightest scraping of a nail against his skin, and gooseflesh broke out on his arms and back beneath the soft silk of his shirt.

The fingers moved again. I assure you that you are safe in this moment, Lord Rudolfo. I bear urgent and private word for you and the Great Mother.

Rudolfo's mind spun its calculations. It was a woman, magicked and well versed in the subverbals of his House. The smell of earth and ash, along with her reference to their gospel, betrayed her as a Marsher.

Magicked and in my home. He felt anger rising within and alongside it, a feeling he was not accustomed to: fear. Still, the interloper assured him of safety, and if she was capable of concealing herself within his manor with such relative ease, capable of placing herself in such close proximity to his person and to his family, then

surely if she had wished to cause harm, she would have done so already.

Jin Li Tam and Aedric were both looking to him now, and he could see by the look on their faces that they knew something was afoot. "My apologies," he said in a careful voice, "but I fear we will need to postpone this audience." He started to rise out of courtesy and felt the hand move from his neck as he did. "My Gypsy Scouts will return you to your quarters, and we will continue our conversation at a later time. I'm very interested to learn of these… prophecies." The word felt distasteful in his mouth, but he smiled around it anyway.

Already, his hands were moving. Keep them under close watch. He looked to Jin Li Tam. "I would speak with you, Lady, when we are alone."

He watched the scouts as they escorted their guests from the room. He watched Seamus and Winters as they followed, and last, he watched Aedric pause at the door. "Is all well, General?" he asked.

Rudolfo inclined his head. "It is, Aedric. But stay nearby."

After the door closed, he expelled held breath and let slip some of the anger that had coiled around his spine. "You come into my house under magicks? You insert yourself into the affairs of the Ninefold Forest?" He felt his voice shaking from it, though he was careful not to raise it. "You have much explaining to do."

Jin Li Tam looked at him, her mouth slack. "What-?"

But another voice cut her off. "You have my deepest apologies, Lord Rudolfo, for this deception." There was a brief pause. "It was necessary that I travel quickly and quietly."

The woman's voice sounded familiar, despite being thickly muffled by the magicks, but Rudolfo could not place it. Still, he felt the anger prickling his scalp as he white-knuckled the arms of his chair. "What you deem necessary is your own concern. You've violated my territories-my very home. This is unprecedented."

"We live," the woman said slowly, "in unprecedented times."

And in that moment, he placed the voice and looked up to lock eyes with Jin Li Tam. Her own face, he saw, had gone pale. Jakob gurgled in his sleep and waved a tiny hand.

"You are a long way from the Marshlands, Ria," he said.

"I am far from the Machtvolk Territories," she conceded. "But the news I bear merited personal and prompt attention. You and your family are in grave danger."

His eyes narrowed, and he willed the pounding to slow behind his temples. "Go on."

Now, her voice was from another corner of the room. "We've word of a growing threat against your household."

"And how exactly have you come by this word?" he asked, tipping

his head slightly as if he might somehow hear her move.

She did not answer at first. When she did, the words were carefully chosen. "As you no doubt have surmised, we have an active network in place."

And, he remembered, the ability to somehow divert their birds and decode their messages. For the last six months, Isaak and his mechoservitors had been busy scripting new codes nearly as fast as they were broken. He paused, uncertain, and then took a risk. "We also know you have access to our birds and codes."

She hesitated, then answered. "Yes. We do."

Honesty, then. How refreshing. Rudolfo sighed. "Continue."

"There are spies in your house, Rudolfo, and there are enemies in your forest." She paused. "And I can assure you, they are not my overzealous evangelists. Though I will deal with them once you've concluded your own audience with them."

Spies in my house. "I want specific details."

"When I have them," she said, "you will have them." He sensed more hesitation in her next pause. "Meanwhile, I wish to extend aid to you. Already, my network is scouring the Named Lands for more substantive evidence of this threat. With your permission, I can widen my investigation to include the Ninefold Forest, and I can also send you a hundred of my Blood Scouts."

Rudolfo's mind reeled at her suggestions. Blood Scouts in the Ninefold Forest? The Machtvolk Y'Zirites investigating his people. But three of her words snared him fastest. "With my permission?"

She chuckled. "I know you think us monsters. The Desolation of Windwir. The kin-healing of House Li Tam and the night of purging. But we are not monsters, Lord Rudolfo. We are the servants of House Y'Zir, and by bonds of kinship, we are your servants as well." Her voice drifted across the room now from the other side. "My deception this day notwithstanding, I have the very best interests of your son at heart, and I would not easily violate the trust or sovereignty of your Ninefold Forest Houses."

Then why not come in open dialogue? Why sneak in, magicked? But even as the questions formed in his mind, he knew the answers without asking. If there were spies in his house, the arrival of the Machtvolk queen would not go unnoticed. Her strategy was sound… if she was indeed being truthful.

He glanced at Jin Li Tam. Still her face retained its calm expression. But when their eyes met again, he saw the rage there. "I appreciate your offer of assistance," he said. "But we will handle these matters within the Ninefold Forest without Machtvolk assistance. If you truly have my son's best interests at heart, you will respect our borders and will share your intelligence with my people as you receive

it."

For a moment, she said nothing. Finally, when she did speak, she was near him again. "Think carefully, Rudolfo," she said, "and you will see that at no time have we raised a finger to harm you or your family. We are allies."

Rudolfo pondered this. He could still remember the voice on the night Hanric was killed. No, not him. And Rudolfo had been cast aside without even a bruise. Later, when Jin Li Tam had taken the Wandering Army to field, she'd challenged a Blood Scout single-handed, and when the Marsher had known it was his so-called Great Mother, he'd refused to fight. Still, these cultists left a forest of bones on the plains of Windwir and had murdered thousands of others in their faith.

"You have done enough harm to others to merit my suspicion," he said.

"And I have saved your son's life," she reminded him. "What does that merit with you?"

Rudolfo nodded slowly but found no words to accompany it.

Her voice became even more muffled, heavy with emotion. "Your son will be the salvation of our world," she said. "We have pledged blade and heart to his well-being and to the well-being of his parents." Her voice was moving across the room. "I will ask you to reconsider my offer of aid. You have many enemies in the Named Lands, and your borders are not secure. Allow me to assist you or, if you can not abide a Machtvolk presence on your soil, send your wife and child to me and I will watch over them until this threat has passed." Her voice was near the door now. "It will pass, Rudolfo, and when the Crimson Empress arrives, she will make all things right."

He squinted but could not even make out the ghost of her. She will make all things right. That would be quite a trick. He considered his next words carefully, tasting them like iron shavings in his mouth before he spoke them. "Ria," he said in a quiet voice, "do not come to me in this way again, and do not broach my borders without announcing yourself."

The door handle moved beneath a hand he could not see. "I will do what I must to preserve the life of this Child of Promise," she said, and her next words stung him though he knew she meant them to. "The question remains, Lord Rudolfo, as to whether or not you will do the same."

Rudolfo heard Jin's swallowed gasp and looked over to see her face red in wrath she could no longer conceal. Still, Jakob slept on.

As the door swung open slowly, Aedric looked in. "Was there someone-?"

When Ria moved past him, the first captain leaped back and

reached for his knives, his lips puckering to whistle third alarm.

"Let her go," Rudolfo said, hearing the weariness in his own voice. Even as he said it, his fingers were moving. Do you believe her message?

Jin Li Tam sighed. She had not spoken through the entire exchange, and he could see that her lips were a tight, pale line. I believe her, but I do not trust her.

Yes. "I concur," he said.

Then, he reached for his glass of chilled peach wine but found that his interest in it had passed. Instead, Rudolfo fixed his eyes upon his sleeping son and pondered the darkening paths that lay before them both. Neb Neb sat in the shadowed opening of a glass cave and watched the dark bird moving high across the sky. He'd seen more of them in the last day, and unlike the messenger birds, these seemed to fly with purpose and direction in this desolate place.

Renard had called them kin-raven, but he'd also told him that they were supposedly extinct… until approximately two years ago, when the first of their kind had migrated back to the Named Lands. Though they flew too high for him to tell, he wondered if it was the same species he used to see in Winters's dreams.

Once the kin-raven passed, he went back to lacquering his thorn rifle and wetting the bulb for another night of guarding the woman.

She'd stirred but had not awakened since he pulled her from the rubble and washed her wounds. He'd mixed the herbs and powders as Renard had showed him, adding extra kalla for the pain she'd feel if the wolf venom took. Then, he wrapped her with bandages torn from a clean cotton shirt he'd found in her bag.

Last, he found the cave, twisted into a wall of glass, where they could wait out the worst of her wounds. He marked their territory, shaking drops from his phial of kin-wolf urine though he doubted it would work with the girl's blood on the wind. Then, he rolled large rocks in front of the opening, leaving just enough room for him to squeeze through if he needed to. And so, he forced himself awake, chewing the root for focus.

He put away his rifle brush and lacquer pot, then crawled back to check on the woman again. She moaned in her sleep from time to time, twisting in the blanket he'd wrapped her in. Neb found himself trying hard not to look at her. Her chiseled features and the gentle curves of her pulled at his eyes. He forced them to her scars.

The cuttings were clearly intentional, forming symbols that he recognized from his years in the Franci orphanage in the shadow of the Androfrancine's Great Library. It was the language of blood magick; the cuttings of House Y'Zir and its Wizard Kings. He could not read the runes from that former age, but he knew there was dark

meaning behind them.

He crouched beside her now and placed a hand upon her forehead. She was cool and clammy to his touch and she stirred again, the blanket falling aside to reveal another curve. When he averted his eyes, they fell upon her pack.

It was small, made for traveling fast and light, not dissimilar to those the Gypsy Scouts wore. Apart from the clean shirt he'd shredded, he'd not gone through it other than to be certain there were no weapons. Her dark iron scout knives were safely tucked away, out of reach and out of sight.

He stared at the pack for a full minute, biting his lower lip. But in the end, he did what he thought Rudolfo or Renard would do; he reached for the pack and retreated with it to the mouth of the cave.

Neb eased the contents out onto the fused glass floor and used his hands to spread them out. He felt his cheeks grow warm when he saw her undergarments and toiletry kit.

He pushed them aside and picked up a compact, thick book. It was old, and he opened it, not recognizing the language within it. But he saw that it was marked with notes, including an inscription in the front. A few of the letters looked familiar but none registered. He set it aside and next looked to the tarnished silver flask. Holding it to his ear he shook it gently.

Half-empty. He hesitated, then unscrewed the top to sniff the contents. The rancid smell turned his stomach, and he glanced back to the woman again. His initial thought was that these were blood magicks-that perhaps she was one of these runners-but he thrust the thought aside. The blood magicks he'd seen lasted three to five days and, in the end, killed their users, consuming them from within before the effects had worn off. And apart from her wounds, the girl showed no signs of other discomfort.

Unless. The other runners had also seemed to defy this fate. What if this was a new blood magick?

Or, he thought, a new people? Certainly the cuttings suggested that.

Tucking the flask into his own pouch, he went to the next object that caught his attention. It was an oddly shaped sliver of black stone. At first he thought the shape held no meaning, but he quickly saw the wings and the beak. It was a crude carving, but clearly a kin-raven. He reached out for it, and when his finger touched it he felt warmth rolling through him, tingling along the bones of his arm, up into his shoulder. Even that brief second, a dozen images flooded him and he felt the nausea of sudden vertigo, as a sound like mighty rushing water swept him.

Neb jerked back his hand and blinked.

He put a finger on the carving, this time forcing himself to keep it there to a count of ten.

The images were there again, spinning about him, and he reached for one, though he wasn't sure how he did it. And as he laid hold of it, it wasn't so much that his own sense of space vanished as it was a new space falling into place around him. He pulled at it, drew upon it like a thread.

It was a darkened place that smelled old and closed off and cold. In the distance, water dripped. Neb did not know how he could pick out that single sound beneath the roar around him, and yet he did. He also heard the gentle wheeze of bellows behind him and turned around.

When the golden eyes fluttered open, his breath caught in his throat. "Nebios Homeseeker," the metal man said, "you should not be here. How have you circumvented our dream tamp? I charge you by the light to leave quickly." The eyes flickered on and off as the mechoservitor worked its shutters and looked from left to right. "We are being listened to."

Neb opened his mouth to ask who was listening but suddenly found himself standing in the courtyard of the Franci orphanage. Brother Hebda stood before him, gaunt and hollow-eyed, now these two years dead. "Neb?"

There was surprise in his voice.

"Brother Hebda?" Certainly, it wasn't the first time he'd seen his father since Windwir's fall. Hebda had warned him that the Marsh King rode south back in the gravediggers' camp in what remained of Windwir, and he'd also told the boy that he would proclaim Petronus Pope and King and that eventually Petronus would break his heart. Both had come true. Still, how was it possible that the small black carving could do this?

Brother Hebda's face paled even as it began to fade along with the crisp blue winter skyline of the great city of Windwir. "Runners in the Wastes," his father said. "Beware of them, Son. I fear they-"

Then, Neb fell out of the scene and into the roaring once again. Spinning, he found himself at the center of a Whymer Maze beneath a graying sky. There, upon a marble bench, a girl sat quietly with her hands folded in her lap. There were evergreen wreaths upon a grave there, and he remembered this place very well. He'd stood here what seemed so long ago and kissed Winters good-bye after Hanric's funereal rites.

The girl wore a plain dress, and her prettiness made his heart hurt. Her long hair was held back from her face by wooden combs, and a light dusting of freckles speckled the bridge of her nose. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. He knew her, though he'd never

seen her without the mud and ash of her people's faith. "Winters?"

She looked up. "Nebios? How-?"

And he was gone again, falling away to land upon a jagged sea of razor-edged glass. "He's wandering in the aether," a woman's voice said. "Awake and casting."

"Yes," another said from the eastern end of D'Anjite's Bridge.

Then a third spoke, and Neb saw the locked well she camped near. The very place he'd found the silver crescent. And this time, he saw the woman who spoke. Her close-cropped hair was blonde, and the cuttings upon her flesh were similar to those upon the woman he watched over.

"We know you see us, Abomination, despite our magicks," she said as her smile widened. "And we see you as well, there in your glass cave."

It is the stone. Somehow, the count had escaped him, and he still held his finger to it. Neb yanked back his hand and scowled down at the carving.

What had he just seen? And was it real? Mechoservitors in dark, forgotten places who spoke of dream tamps. The ghost of his dead father warning him of runners in the Wastes-something Neb already knew, in an uncharacteristic prophetic failure. And a Winters who no longer wore the mourning hope of her promised home.

And what had the woman in the Wastes called him? Abomination.

He tucked the book into his pouch alongside the flask, but for the longest time he sat and stared at the carving, suddenly unwilling to touch it again.

Finally, he scooped it up into a bit of cloth and tipped it into his pouch as well.

Then, he settled back against the wall, his thorn rifle across his lap. Beyond his cave, a kin-wolf bayed beneath a rising moon. Behind him, the scarred woman whimpered and cried out in her sleep at whatever darkness rode her dreams. Jin Li Tam Jin Li Tam sheathed her knives and wiped the sweat from her face and neck. The evenings grew cooler now as the winds picked up, sweeping south from the Dragon's Spine. With the sky still purple from the setting sun, she felt that breeze now as it kissed her wet skin.

Taking in a great lungful of lavender and roses, she tested herself to see if the evening's knife dance had settled her.

Yes, she realized, I feel better.

After the audience with Ria and her evangelists, Jin had left Jakob with Rudolfo and stormed away to rage privately for an hour. But it had not been enough. In the end, between breaks spent feeding Jakob, a run and a dance or two with the knives had dulled the anger

as she suspected it might. There was a time when she would not have known that about herself, but there was also a time when she wouldn't have realized that she went to anger first when she became afraid.

She was there in the room with Rudolfo for hours biding her time. How long had she hidden there? How much had she heard? And had she hidden in other rooms, too? Was she here now, watching? She felt another stab of anger.

Jin Li Tam took another breath. Then, she looked to the house. The windows were lit now, beckoning, and she found the one she knew belonged to Rudolfo. No doubt, he sat in his study and took dinner in the midst of reports and messages to digest and respond to.

She set out for the manor and paused near the edge of the Whymer Maze. Faint footfalls reached her ears, and she saw a young woman emerge from it. Winters, she realized, no doubt returning from Hanric's Rest at the center of the maze, near the Whymer meditation bench.

There is much to meditate upon.

Jin whistled the low, soft note of a Gypsy Scout on alert.

Winters looked up, startled. "Lady Tam," she said.

Jin stopped. The look upon the girl's face was consternation and fear. To a degree, it made sense-Ria claimed to be her older sister, thought dead in infancy, and certainly by now Rudolfo had told her about their magicked guest. Still, she had to ask. "Are you okay, Winters?"

The girl shook her head, and for a moment, Jin thought she might burst into tears. "I don't think I am. I failed my people. And I think I saw Neb."

Neb? Jin Li Tam looked around. "You think Neb is home?"

Winters took a deep breath. "No, not like that." She swallowed. "More like a dream. He was in a cave made of glass. There was a woman with him. Only, he didn't look like himself. His hair's too long, and he's too gaunt. He looked at me and said my name, and then he was gone."

Jin knew the two of them had somehow shared dreams together before he'd entered the Churning Wastes. Until recently, Jin hadn't put much thought into Marsher mysticism with its glossolalia, prophecies and Homeseeking. But she'd also not believed there was a magick strong enough to bring back the dead or heal the mortally ill. She felt her eyebrows furrow. "It's been a long time since you've shared dreams with him, hasn't it?"

"Seven or eight months," Winters agreed. "But this was not a shared dream. It was like a dream, but I was awake." She looked away and Jin read the discomfort. "A… vision, I think."

She knew the girl was no stranger to such things and wanted to

ask more to get to what part of this made her uncomfortable, but then it struck her. There was a woman with him.

She thought about telling her that she should not concern herself with it or leap to any specific assumption about the woman, but instead, she changed the subject. "And you feel you gave up on your people?"

She watched the discomfort melt into sadness. "I did. I did not have to give up on them. But I did. I came here and hid myself underneath a mountain of books."

Jin Li Tam chuckled, and it was sardonic. "You've not failed them yet, and I don't think it's fair to say you've given up on them, either." She watched the girl's eyebrows knit together. "Maybe you don't remember, but you had few choices left on that day, and you needed time to absorb that great loss and craft an appropriate response to it. You came to your only kin-clave in the Named Lands and took asylum. This is not failure or abandonment."

She saw a bit of hope spark there, but it went out too soon. "I can't even fathom an appropriate response to this."

Jin Li Tam nodded. "For now. But you will." She locked eyes with the girl, willing courage and hope into her that she did not herself have to give. "Give it time. Meanwhile"-here she hefted her knife belt, dangling the sheathed blades-"it's time for you to get back to your knife lessons."

They'd started practicing together in those early days after Winters had first settled into the Forest life, but they'd stopped for the wedding and the royal family's tour of the Ninefold Forest. Getting back to the knives-and out of that basement-would be good for the girl.

And, Jin realized, it was good for her to have someone to teach. "So tomorrow morning, then?"

Winters offered a weak smile. "Tomorrow morning."

Jin Li Tam inclined her head. "Good. And don't fret about the boy."

Inclining her own head, Winters turned and moved in the direction of Library Hill. Jin Li Tam watched her go. Then, she set out for the manor.

She had told Winters that in time, the young, deposed Queen would find an appropriate response to what had happened to her last winter. On that day that Winters lost everything, Jin Li Tam had bargained with a devil and saved what mattered most to her.

Like Winters, she could not fathom what her response might be, and now, with the anger burned away, her fear moved toward sadness she could not afford to feel, and she tried to keep it at bay. Focus on what you have gained, she told herself. Life for your son.

She paused at the hidden entrance and the series of narrow passageways that would take her to Jakob's room and then to her own bathing chambers, and turned again to take in the nightfall.

She tried not to think of her father and the scars that covered him, or of the mass graves she'd never seen upon that distant island, or of the orphaned children now nearby who bore the scar of Y'Zir over their hearts. She tried not to think of them and failed.

For all that I gained, I've lost as well. And for that, a response was certainly called for. But what response?

Wiping a stray tear from her cheek, Jin Li Tam begged an answer from the first star that poked its light through the dusky canopy of sky.

Then, she slipped into her home and pushed her fear once more aside.

Chapter 6

Winters Winters undressed by moonlight, her bare skin noticing the slight chill of her basement bedroom. She hurried into her sleep shift and then scuttled into bed, pulling the covers up quickly and gasping at the cool of the sheets.

Lady Tam had surprised her; she'd thought she was alone in the gardens but for the scouts who patrolled it. But she was glad to have seen Lady Tam and spoken with her, however briefly. She'd missed her and Jakob especially while they were off touring the Ninefold Forest. Rudolfo had offered to bring Winters along, but she had preferred the library.

Hiding underneath your mountain of books. Perhaps, she thought, but no more. Now, she knew that something had to be done. The light of blind, loyal faith in those evangelists' eyes. And the self-assured tone that masqueraded as love, dripping from their voices. Her people were beset by wolves, and it seemed Rudolfo's were now, as well.

He'd told her of Ria's visit, and she'd felt her own mouth drop open in surprise. Then, he'd shared her message of the impending threat. Now she understood something that had perplexed her.

Ria had been in the Ninefold Forest when she sent the kin-raven. The violation of Rudolfo's borders and home were handled with discreet precision. She'd even kept it from Winters, having her dismissed from the room with the others. If it had not been for Rudolfo's trust in her, Winters might never have learned of her sister's visit. Something about that bothered her.

Because of the message. Come home to me and joy. If she felt so, why not ask herself?

She felt the slightest breeze and started. The hand fell over her mouth quickly before she could cry out, and a calm voice whispered at her ear. "Be still, little sister."

Winters struggled against the hand, then stopped.

"Much better," Ria said, lifting her hand.

Winters waited, surprised at how unafraid she suddenly felt. She simply breathed, in and out.

"I wanted to see you before I left," the woman said. Winters lay still, unable to find words. I must say something.

Winteria the Elder continued. "You would not recognize the Marshlands. Towns and schools are being built-each with its own Council of Twelve. Children are being taught the oldest ways and taking the mark. Settlers are moving into the river valleys around Windwir, and shrines are being built in the villages that were already there."

She thought of the Tam children and their scars and imagined the same upon the mud-and-ash-rubbed skin of her people. Finally, she found her words. "You savage my people with heresy."

"I restore our people to their prideful place as servants of the most high. And I meant it, Little Winteria: Come home to me and share this joy. Home is for the taking, and the advent of the Crimson Empress is at hand."

Winters wanted to rage. She wanted to scream at this woman, lash out at her with fists and feet, but once more calm asserted itself in her and she poured herself into each breath she drew in, each she pushed out.

Winters said nothing.

After a minute, she felt the breeze again and saw the window open. Ria's voice drifted across the room to her. "I've brought you a present. It's beneath your pillow. Perhaps it will change your mind."

Winters resisted the urge to reach beneath her pillow. Instead, she waited a full three minutes. Then, she crawled from the bed and closed the window, locking it. After, she lit her lamp and carried it to the table beside the bed. Reaching out a tentative hand, she lifted her pillow.

A small book lay beneath it, bound in leather. The cover bore no title, but it did look old. She put her pillow down and took up the volume.

Opening the book, she saw the title and remembered it instantly from the audience earlier. The Gospel of Ahm Y'Zir, Last Son of the Wizard King Xhum Y'Zir.

She read the first paragraph. The print was too consistent for a scribe and the pages too small for a printing press. Still, it was a familiar style to her, though the age of the paper made it seem highly unlikely.

This gospel, she strongly suspected, had been scripted by a mechoservitor.

Intrigued, she went back to the place her thumb marked and continued reading. Hours later, when she finished it just as her lamp guttered, Winters understood why her people had been so easily swayed. There was a beauty and a power to the story, made even more compelling by the miracles clearly predicted that she herself had borne witness to.

This gospel, she realized, was carefully crafted. A snare carefully set for her people. She had talked with Rudolfo enough to know about House Li Tam's involvement in this, the secret network Vlad's father had put into place, operated by his grandson.

Not just my people. The realization struck her hard, though she wasn't sure why she hadn't realized this all along. This snare caught

them all. It took down the Androfrancines. It shattered the trust between the nations of the Named Lands. It created a strong, unbeatable army on the flanks of the New World and set Rudolfo and his family apart.

The age of the Crimson Empress was indeed at hand, and it was not a gospel that required faith. It was a message of something dark and terrible coming regardless of whether or not she believed it.

Tomorrow, she would take this book to Rudolfo. He would understand the rune marks of House Y'Zir, she suspected. And he would want to know what was coming. He would want to do what he could to prepare for it.

When Winters did finally slip into light slumber, she found her dreams were full of Neb, though he would not look at her or acknowledge her when she called out to him.

"He is in grave danger," she thought she heard a voice whisper into her dream.

Alone in the Churning Wastes, her white-haired boy fled just ahead of those ravening kin-wolves that hunted him.

Powerless to help, Winters watched. Petronus Petronus paced his study and tried to shake the sense that something terrible was coming on the wind. Each time he looked out the window at the spires and towers of the Great Library and the massive city that spread out from there, he saw brief flashes of a plain littered with skeletons and felt the bite of blisters in his hands. He heard the distant sound of pickaxes and shovels working frozen ground and vaguely remembered a boy beside him, one with hair shocked white at the desolation he'd witnessed. But what desolation? Where?

Why can't I remember?

There was a knock at his door and he looked up. The gaunt Androfrancine stood in the doorway. "The time for subtleties has passed," he said. "The boy is in grave danger."

"Which boy?" But Petronus already reached into his memory, and a name drifted into reach on the tide of that vast ocean of things he could not remember. "Neb?"

The man nodded. "Aye, Father." He walked farther into the room, and Petronus noted that he carried a rolled-up chart beneath his arm. "There was an incident earlier. He broke through the mechoservitors' dream tamp-something he should not be able to do without a conduit. Still, he's done it and he's announced himself loudly. He's also revealed the canticle." The man did not wait for Petronus's invitation. He went to the sitting area, spread his chart upon the table there and took a seat near the wide fireplace. "Sit with me, Father."

Petronus walked to the empty chair facing the man and sat. "Do we have any expeditions nearby? Do we have time to get a contingent

of the Gray Guard to him?"

The man sighed. "You are disoriented still. The stone has that impact. We're still new to it and haven't learned the more subtle nuances of using it."

Nothing this man said made sense. Petronus leaned forward. "Stone?"

His companion nodded. "I'll show you." Then, closing his eyes and furrowing his brow, he groaned and Petronus felt the vertigo seizing him. His study fell away, as did the city of Windwir, and a chill took him. He stood on the shore of an underground lake of quicksilver, and at the center of the lake, set into the silver water as if it were a setting in a ring, rose a large, smooth black stone. A man lay sprawled over it, facedown, and in the distance, Petronus could see the man's lips working in a whisper.

But the voice was clear in his ear. "We do not know exactly what it is, and we are only now discerning exactly what it can do. Some artifact of the Younger Gods buried and forgotten in the Beneath Places."

Petronus looked around the cavern, trying to memorize it, but before he finished, he was once again in his study, sitting across from the man. "I will not remember this when I…" He could not find the right word and finally settled for the closest. "… return?"

"You'll remember more than the times we've spoken when you were awake," the man said. "It seems to work better when the receiver is asleep. We think the Younger Gods intended it to affect dreaming."

Petronus nodded though it made no sense to him at all. An island that let a man speak into the dreams of another? "And this boy you speak of, he somehow is using it, too?"

"No. Neb isn't using it. The stone is under constant guard, and the boy is here." The man lowered his finger to the chart, and Petronus saw it was a map of the Churning Wastes. "The runners are here, here and here." More pointing. "And to the best of our knowledge they are under blood magicks."

A question found Petronus. "How are you tracking them?"

The man looked as if he wanted to say more but then thought better of it. "It is best not to share too much with you. Regardless of how Neb has accessed the aether, all of the blood-affected are vulnerable when he does."

Blood-affected. A distant memory of an earlier conversation pried at him behind his eyes. "You said the blood magicks made me sensitive to the dream, like Neb."

The man nodded, his face tightening with worry. "But we will not discuss the dream here now, Father. Circumstances have changed, and the dream is in jeopardy until Neb is safe."

"And who exactly is hunting him?" Petronus was certain that any answer provided would slip away from him, but he asked anyway.

"Enemies of the dream," the man said. "Enemies of the light."

Petronus willed his eyes to harden along with the line of his jaw. "That is no answer."

The man regarded him and sighed. "We are still uncertain beyond that, Father. But they are behind the fall of Windwir, ultimately, and behind the Y'Zirite gospel that called for your execution and resurrection. We know the Tams were involved, but not to what extent."

Execution and resurrection. Fall of Windwir. These sounded familiar to him, just as the boy's name did, but he could not place any of them within proper context. But he did know the name Tam, though he could not fathom why Vlad's family would be involved in something like this.

But how could Windwir be fallen if he sat within that great city now?

As if to reassure himself, he looked around his study and took in another lungful of the summer scents that drifted in from the open windows. He looked back to the map and to the chart on the table. "Nothing you say makes sense to me."

The man nodded. "I know it seems that way. I'm still unsure of the casting. Finding Neb is far simpler. At least it was before the dream tamp. But he's different. He-" But the man cut himself off now, looking away. "When you go farther into the Wastes, I won't be able to reach you, either. But it seems Neb can reach me. Don't let him try until the threat is dealt with, Father. Too much is at stake."

A hundred questions swam his mind, each looking for access to his tongue. Finally, one broke through. "What do you expect me to do?"

"Enlist the aid of the Gypsy King. Find Neb. Do not fail, Father, or the light is gone forever."

Petronus opened his mouth to speak again, but the vertigo gripped him and that roaring took him yet again, pulling him into a brightness that burned as it penetrated him. He forced his eyes to stay open, and though it took every bit of effort, he kept them upon the map, memorizing the geography nearest to the man's pointing finger. He opened his mouth again and pulled in a great lungful of the white, hot soup he now swam in. "Who are you?"

He could no longer see the man. He could no longer see the chart. But a distant voice reached him even as the roar died out and the light faded into the quiet midnight he suddenly found himself in.

"I am Arch-Behaviorist Hebda," the man whispered, "of the Office for the Preservation of Light."

That voice still whispered in his ear when he leaped from his cot, pulled on his robes and went out into the moonlight to find Grymlis and ready a bird for Rudolfo.

Yes, Petronus thought. I remember. Charles Charles cocked his head and bent the light from his reflector deeper into the mechoservitor's chest cavity. He stretched nimble fingers up and in, reaching for the slipped memory scroll.

"He should be fine now," he said, withdrawing his hand and firing the metal man's boiler as he did.

"Thank you, Father," Isaak said.

Charles chuckled. "You don't have to thank me, Isaak. It's my responsibility."

Isaak's eye shutters opened and closed. Gears inside whirred and clacked. "I suppose it is a part of parenthood."

Now it was Charles's turn to blink. Yes, it was. "And you provided this care before I turned up, didn't you?"

They'd been discussing the various aspects of love for the better part of an hour. Isaak had brought it up, and lately it was less and less surprising to Charles. The mechoservitor was full of questions, and it seemed that the more Charles answered, the more Isaak asked. Now, Isaak hissed steam as if surprised by his answer. "I did provide that care. But I was instructed to do so. By Lord Rudolfo, of course."

Charles's fingers found the sequence of hidden buttons and switches and pushed them. The mechoservitor he'd been repairing shuddered to life. "Be still," he murmured, and it did. He looked up to Isaak. "Yes, he did instruct you to. But if he hadn't instructed you to do so, would you have done it anyway?"

Isaak shrugged, and Charles chuckled. He even learns our gestures from us.

Isaak's voice lowered. "I do not know."

"You would have."

Isaak's amber eyes glowed brighter. "How can you know this?"

"Because," Charles said, "I am your father and I made you to be logical. It is logical to preserve your kind."

Isaak nodded. "It is." Then, the metal man did something surprising. He hesitated. "Father?"

Charles looked up. "Yes?"

"You made us. I want to ask you a question about how we were made." His tone betrayed how serious his question must be.

"I built you from Rufello's Specifications and from scraps dug out of the Wastes," Charles said.

"No," Isaak said. "Not how we were made."

Charles leaned in to the mechoservitor on his worktable and whispered into its ear. "Return to task, Mechoservitor Twelve."

"Returning to task," the mechoservitor said as it stood and left the room.

Charles turned back to Isaak and wiped his hands clean on a nearby rag. "What do you want to know, Isaak?"

Isaak paused, and a wisp of steam leaked out from the exhaust grate in his back. "I want to know why we don't dream."

Charles scratched his head. "I don't think you were meant to dream," Charles said, picking his words carefully. "The Franci believe that dreams are where the basements of the brain work out the hidden fears and hopes of a man's life."

Isaak blinked. "Surely women dream, too? The library certainly references-"

Charles laughed, interrupting him. "Yes. And children. And dogs, even."

"But not mechoservitors?"

Charles did not like the direction the conversation moved in. Even he was unsure of Isaak's status-he was clearly sentient. And he was learning. At a rapid pace. But what was he? "I don't know," Charles said. "It wasn't in Rufello's Specifications. I suppose a dream could be fashioned. It's not much more than a memory scroll, though the random nature of dreaming would be hard to-"

Isaak's next question ambushed him. "Is it dangerous?"

He felt his eyebrows raise. "Is what dangerous?"

Isaak lowered his voice. "Dreaming."

Charles thought about this. "No, not especially. Though not all dreams are pleasant."

"So were I to have a dream, it would not be harmful?"

"No," Charles said with another chuckle. "I don't believe it would."

Isaak moved toward the door. "Thank you, Father."

Charles watched him leave. "You're welcome, Isaak."

He'd just settled back into work when there was a knock at his door. "Back so soon?" he called out. It didn't surprise him.

But when the door opened and Rudolfo entered, he was surprised. The lord of the Ninefold Forest rarely put in appearances in his shop. But now, the man walked in, his eyes haunted by the circles of sleeplessness beneath them. The Gypsy Scout behind him took up a position outside the door as Rudolfo closed it. "Forgive my unannounced visit, Arch-Engineer Charles. I have matters to discuss with you."

Charles put down the wrench he'd been using. "No forgiveness required, Lord Rudolfo. Shall we retire to a more comfortable room for conversation?"

Rudolfo shook his head. "No, I would speak with you here. These are matters of great discretion."

He looks worried. And he should be, Charles reckoned. In the span of two years he'd inherited a lot of orphans and had taken on a tremendous labor on behalf of the light. And while he did, the Named Lands came apart around him. "You have my ear and my silence, Lord."

Rudolfo moved to a stool near Charles and sat upon it. He looked out of place in his silk jacket and green turban, surrounded by bits of broken mechanicals and scattered tools. "There is a type of steel so silver that it gives back a perfect reflection. The Marsh King's axe is made of such a metal. Are you familiar with it?"

Charles nodded. "Firstfall steel. Legend has it that it fell from the moon along with the Moon Wizard and his armies at the end of the Age of the Weeping Czars."

"Yes. Can you work with this steel?"

Charles paused to think. He could, but it was a rare metal. More rare than gold or platinum. "I could work with it," he said, "depending upon what you needed it worked into."

"The metal's reflective capacity exposes stealth magicks-even those built from blood. We learned this last year during the attack on the Firstborn Feast." When Rudolfo said the words, Charles saw his eyes darken.

Charles prided himself on anticipating needs and already, he started nodding. "Some kind of device that would take advantage of those properties, then?"

Rudolfo offered a tight smile. "Yes."

Charles started to wonder why and stopped. We've already been breached. It was the fear and doubt upon his face, the sleeplessness in his eyes. "I would need the metal. It's extremely hard to come by. A handful of the wealthiest families in the Named Lands might have a few pieces of it. There's more, of course, buried at Windwir."

"Windwir is out of reach to us now," Rudolfo said. "But my procurement agents are quietly in place and at your disposal. See Isaak for a fresh code book."

Charles hesitated, then offered up the truth he wanted to withhold. "This could take time, Lord."

Rudolfo sighed. "We don't have time, Charles. Just do your best."

"I will do my best, Lord." Already, he was thinking of the design and whether or not lenses could be fashioned using the mirrors to reflect back through them in a type of spectacle that could be worn. He looked to his drawing pad. "While we look for the metal, I'll give thought to some design specifications."

Rudolfo stood. "Excellent. Two final things and I'll leave you to your work."

Charles waited, taking in the slight man. He's frightened now, but

this will only add fierceness to him later.

"As you know, I am considering the potential of a standing army."

Yes, Charles thought. He'd been in the room that night, and he'd seen the teeth that consideration had brought to Rudolfo's soul. Change was certainly the path life took, but it was never as simple as it sounded. "It may become necessary, Lord."

Rudolfo nodded and looked away. "It may indeed. If it does-and if it has any chance of standing against this Y'Zirite threat to the west-it will need magickal and mechanical assistance."

Yes. And yet all of the war-making knowledge had been burned out at Windwir. All but what I carry in my head. Charles sighed. "I do not wish to make war engines, Rudolfo."

Rudolfo's eyes snapped back onto Charles, and there was a fire suddenly ignited there. "Nor do I, Charles, but I will not lose all that we build here. I will guard it whatever way I must."

What had they called the Gypsy King? Charles stretched his memory back to the conversations he'd overheard on the return journey from the Blood Temple. Shepherd of the light? But he knew the man meant more than just the library and its mechanicals. He meant the boy, too, who had appeared here in the middle of his life. Charles wasn't sure what to say. "I will give it thought. Most of what we kept hidden is lost now."

"Consideration is all I ask," Rudolfo said. "Work with Lysias and Aedric. I am only interested in protecting the Ninefold Forest."

Charles could see that on the man's face. But now, even as he read it there, it vanished, hidden behind a smile. "Thank you for your time, Arch-Engineer."

Rudolfo moved toward the door. He put his hand on the latch, and Charles remembered something. "Lord Rudolfo?"

He turned. "Yes?"

"There was another matter you wished to discuss with me."

Rudolfo thought for a moment, his brow furrowing. "Oh. Yes. I'm… concerned… about Isaak. He's asking a lot of unusual questions and seems preoccupied. And this matter with the message bird is worrisome." He paused. "Keep good watch over him, Charles."

Even Rudolfo's noticed it. Charles nodded. "I will, Lord."

Then, Rudolfo slipped from the room and Charles turned to his drawing pad.

He sketched for an hour, laying out specifications for a type of heavy spectacle, then tried a spyglass and a handful of other variants, but his mind kept coming back to his metal child and his ten thousand questions. When Rudolfo had asked after him, he'd seen the concern on his face. It was a type of love, Charles knew, and he wondered at it.

Why do I not feel love for my metal children? He could not answer that question without following more threads backward in time than he could afford in this moment. The Franci certainly could tell him after a few hours upon their analyst benches. They could give him many theories, not the least of which was that they were machines, designed for a purpose and powered by a sunstone, running scripts written by men.

But I have made a machine who wishes he could dream.

And even with that thought, he did not feel anything beyond pride and curiosity. Nothing quite as strong as affection, yet enough for him to do what needed doing for their care and to sometimes enjoy their company.

Perhaps, Charles thought, it was enough for now.

Chapter 7

Jin Li Tam The courtyard on the south side of the library was a mad press of people as Foresters and refugees alike gathered for the dedication of the west-facing wing.

Jin Li Tam stood between the pillars of the western patio and bounced on her heels to keep Jakob amused while Rudolfo talked quietly with Aedric and Isaak. Jakob had been fussy of late after being so long a quiet baby, but she suspected that his first teeth were coming in.

I will ask Lynnae for teething powders. The girl had spent the last few months working with the River Woman and seemed to have an aptitude for the work. The River Woman herself had referred to her as an apt apprentice at least twice, both times bringing a blush to the girl's cheeks.

Thinking of Lynnae, she glanced around the front lines of the crowd to see if she could find her. When she singled her out, standing between the River Woman and her father, Lysias, Jin Li Tam flashed a smile that was quickly returned. Then, she turned back to Rudolfo and the others.

"It's time, Lord Rudolfo," Isaak said.

Ahead of them, the crowd built. This first wing was small, but in these times, small victories had to be celebrated as they were achieved. There at the base of the stone steps, wagons of food and wine stood ready for the feast to follow. After eighteen months of construction and a near-constant stream of books flowing from the mechoservitors' pens, they'd reclaimed some tiny part of what had been lost at Windwir.

And today marks two years.

She stepped to the side of the podium and felt pride as her husband stepped forward. He held a single sheet of scribbled notes in his hand and glanced to her and Jakob as he placed the paper on the flat, wooden surface. Then, he looked to Isaak and Aedric before clearing his voice.

"Two years ago," he began, "we all watched the sky and lamented that loss of light that was Windwir's pyre." He glanced to Isaak again, and Jin saw how carefully he chose his words. "Evil men with terrible intent used the Androfrancines' knowledge against them, and in doing so, changed our world."

She heard the timbre in his voice as he projected it over the crowd. Watching them, she could see the rapt attention upon their faces as they listened to their king. They love him, she realized. And she knew he and his family had earned that love over two millennia in

this place. She'd seen that love poured out-even extended to her, especially since Jakob's birth-since she'd first come to the Ninefold Forest nearly two years ago.

She could remember pondering that charismatic Gypsy King and what one of his young Gypsy Scouts had told her in those early days. He always knows the right path to take… and he always takes it.

Not so anymore. She could see the doubt in his eyes, and sometimes, in their late-night murmurings, he would whisper his fears to her while she held him close. And though she did not say it, she felt it, too. The world had changed with the Desolation of Windwir and had kept changing from there.

People were applauding, and Jakob stirred awake in her arms. She felt a stab of guilt and looked up. Had he finished so soon? She looked to him and he appeared to be paused, finger raised to make another comment. She scanned the crowed, glancing again toward Lynnae.

She paused.

Just left of Lynnae stood a young man with close-cropped hair, and in a sea of smiles and clapping, his face was sober and his hands were at his sides. He was staring at the central pillar of the portico.

Rudolfo continued speaking, and she followed the young man's eyes. Something shimmered there, and she opened her mouth to shout.

The light was white and followed by a hot fist of wind and sound that shattered her ears. Something large and metal and fast impacted her and the world spun as she felt long metal arms encircling her, pulling her and Jakob close as heat billowed around them. She heard cracking as the pillar collapsed and the roof followed. She heard rock hitting metal and bellows rasping. She choked and sobbed.

The dust and smoke settled, and Jakob's wail rose up to join the screams and cries of the wounded and bereaved.

A reedy voice whispered in her ear. "Safe," he said. His voice had an odd lilt to it, and she heard popping and grinding deep in his chest cavity.

The world wobbled around her, and she fought its graying, forcing herself to move as best she could, shifting Jakob. "Isaak?" she asked.

But the metal man did not answer. Neb Outside the cave, kin-wolves slunk about, casting shadows by the light of a blue-green moon as a warm wind moaned down the canyons of the ruined city. They'd been out since the sun dropped, though they'd not approached as yet. Still, when the wind dipped, he could hear their claws upon the ancient, decimated street.

Odd. They do not howl.

Behind him, the woman stirred, and he turned to face her. Her fever had broken early in the day, telling him that his poultice and powders were doing their work. More and more, she moved and mumbled, her eyes moving behind closed lids. Neb went to her now and drew his canteen, unscrewing the cap.

He'd found three sources of water on the quick scouting runs he'd allowed himself since securing them in the cave. In the morning, he would need to make another run if she kept taking the water.

Placing a hand beneath her head, he lifted it and put the mouth of the canteen against her lower lip. Her lips parted by reflex, and he tipped the water into her mouth. The skin on the back of her neck felt cool and smooth now in his hands.

Her eyes fluttered and opened. They went wide, and he saw that they were a light green. She started to struggle, her mouth opening as she pulled in the breath to shout. When she did, it was a hoarse sound but in a language he did not recognize, and her wrestling was too weak for any kind of effectiveness. He waited, holding the canteen to her mouth once more.

"I can't understand you," he said, keeping his voice low and quiet.

Her eyebrows furrowed, bending the scars on her forehead. "Understand?" she asked.

He heard the snuffling outside now and pressed the canteen into her hands. Lifting his thorn rifle, he moved back to the mouth of the cave in time to see a large shadow retreating from the stones he'd piled at the front of the cave. He took aim and squeezed the bulb, listening to the hiss and cough of the thorn as it exited the rifle and closed the distance between them. He could not tell if the poisoned missile clattered off against stone and glass or if it found its mark in the flank of the kin-wolf.

He turned back and saw the woman pulling herself weakly from the blanket. She wasn't getting far, but the fear on her face was unmistakable. Neb moved slowly toward her, crouching nearby as she tried to pull herself up with trembling arms. Her clothing, wet from sweat, clung to her, and once more, Neb found himself averting his eyes. He thought perhaps the scars upon her arms and neck and face would snare his eyes, but in truth, each line of images pulled toward the curved parts of her he sought to avoid.

Neb swallowed. "You understand Landlish?"

She stopped, her eyes going wide for a moment. She turned to him. "Yes." She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice was hesitant and uncertain. "But… it has been a very long time."

She settled back now, still eyeing him with suspicion. But when he extended the canteen, she took it and drank from it. He watched as her eyes broke contact with him here and there to take in her

surroundings. Each time, he knew she marked some detail.

She is a scout of some kind. Keeping his voice even and low, he asked her the first question that came to mind. "Where are you from?"

"Far away," she said. "But that doesn't matter." Her eyes narrowed. "Are you the Abomination?"

The other woman called me that. He did not know how to answer, but the questioning look on his face must have been sufficient. She continued. "The one called Nebios Homeseeker?"

He felt the blood leave his face as the hair on his arms and neck rose. "I'm Neb. How do you know my-?"

She leaned forward, interrupting him, her eyes suddenly wide and wild. "You're in grave danger. My sisters hunt you even now, and through you, the mechoservitors. You must go."

Neb blinked, his memory pulling him back to his encounter with the carved kin-raven and the woman in the Wastes who had spoken to him. We see you there as well in your glass cave. He thought of them, magicked and racing across the Wastes, and then he recalled the phial of blood magicks this woman had in her pack. "And what of you?" he asked. "Are you here hunting me as well?" And how is it you can use the magicks and not be killed by their potency?

Their eyes met. "I was not hunting you, though it is what I was sent to do." She looked away. "I have other matters to attend to."

He looked to her bandaged shoulder and saw the fresh blood seeping through. "I don't think you'll be attending to those matters any time soon."

Even as he said it, he could see the pain and weariness registering on her face. She settled back into the makeshift bed. "You must leave," she said again. "My sisters will tend to me."

Neb glanced toward the mouth of the cave. The kin-wolves had gone quiet, and that meant it was time for him to take up his post. He looked back to the girl. There was urgency in her voice and written into her furrowed brow. "Why would your sisters wish me harm?" Another question dug into him with the sharpness of an Entrolusian cavalry spur. "And why do they call me Abomination?"

"They do," she said, "because of what you are. But they need to stop the metal dreamers first, and only you can find them."

"And why are you telling me this?"

Her eyelids drooped, and her voice faltered. "So that you will listen to me and leave while you can."

She closed her eyes now, and her breathing became heavy. He looked once more to the mouth of the cave, then set himself to changing her dressing and rebandaging her wound. She stirred twice and tried to push him away, but he easily held her in place long enough to finish his work.

Then, he slipped back to the mouth of the cave. He fished the cloth-wrapped icon from his pouch and studied it, careful not to touch it. He had no idea what it was or how it did what it had done, but he did not doubt for a moment that it had shown him one of the mechoservitors who had fled Sanctorum Lux, and that he'd seen Winters, though she looked foreign to him, cleaned and dressed like any other woman in the Named Lands instead of wearing the dirt and ash of her people. The strange carving had even reached beyond the grave to his father Hebda. And he'd seen the women who hunted him, too.

More importantly, they'd seen him. And if this girl spoke the truth, they wanted him to help them find the metal dreamers.

He put the wrapped image away and thought for a moment about pulling out the plain box and the silver crescent that lay within it. The moon was up, and the canticle would be clear. He could taste the code buried in that song, could feel the equations and formulas within the numbers it hid. He knew it lay there, ancient and beguiling, and that somehow the mechoservitors had found a dream within it.

The metal dreamers.

The idea of the metal men dreaming intrigued him. He'd spent a good deal of time with Isaak during their early days at the Seventh Forest Manor. He'd found him different from the others, somehow set apart after his experience with the blood magicks at Windwir. Of all his kind, Isaak seemed the most advanced, and Neb had watched fascinated as the metal man became more and more human each day.

He had passed Isaak the scroll from Sanctorum Lux, and he believed that it was a copy of the metal dream. He wondered if the metal man had run the script. If he had, what had he seen?

And what about it brings these strangely carved women, hunting us in the Wastes?

His eyes went back to the box, and he glanced to the sleeping girl. He craved the song in its fullness, but knew if he used the crescent, the woman might hear it as well. And he could not trust her. Not yet. Certainly she'd seemed sincere in her effort to convince him to flee. And he believed her-believed his own ears, having heard them say so-that her sisters hunted him. Some small voice in the back of his head assured him that he did not want to be found by them.

Still, how could he leave?

It was a question for another time because there was time. Tomorrow, he would check her wounds and reassess.

He closed his eyes and called up a map of the Wastes by memory and recalled what geography he'd seen when he saw and heard the Blood Scouts. The closest had been the one at the well-at least a week by the root. But he could not be certain that the blood magicks didn't

cut that time drastically. Regardless, there was time. He could not afford to panic.

"Panic," Renard had told him again and again, "is the Waste's swiftest killer."

They do because of what you are.

Her words were cryptic. How or why anyone could see him as an abomination eluded him, but nothing he'd experienced these past two years had made any kind of sense. Rationally or not, it was happening. Even his very father-dead now these two years-had cast his own warning.

Neb shook his head and moved his focus to the song. He could hear the crescent in its lockbox, and again he resisted the urge to open it and cradle it against his ear.

Outside, the kin-wolves broke their silence and bayed as the swollen stars guttered overhead. The canticle was indeed loud tonight.

Settling into his dark corner, thorn rifle laid carefully across his knees, Neb watched the night and listened for the dream beneath each note. Rudolfo They burned bonfires in the courtyard to illuminate the rubble, and Rudolfo paced and cursed as the rescuers dug the last survivors and bodies from the wreckage.

He stung from a dozen cuts and burns; he ached from the same number of bruises. His right arm hung broken in a sling, and his stomach clenched and unclenched as rage and anguish washed through him.

Be alive.

Twice, he'd tried to move past the Gypsy Scouts set to keep him from the wreckage. Both times, their hands upon his chest had been enough to subdue him, though the first time he'd raised fist to them before he caught himself.

Be alive, he willed again.

Once more his mind veered into that place he could not bear it to go. His first thought was of them when he first stirred to wakefulness in the medico tent, and he'd felt the world shift and slide when Aedric, battered, burned and bleeding himself, told him that they still hadn't found his wife and child. Or Isaak.

How long ago had that been?

Hours.

A white bird flitted back from the blast zone and was caught in the catch net. He'd seen it happen three times now this night and had watched the medicos race out. He heard shouting, and a team set out even now at a sprint, carrying a stretcher between them.

He saw Lysias barking orders to teams of refugees as they moved books by wheelbarrow around to the entrances of the subbasements. He'd been told that the general's men had extinguished the flames

quickly, forming a bucket brigade within moments of the blast, even as the Gypsy Scouts took up a perimeter and rescuers began pulling out survivors. Of course, he'd been unaware of this, and he still felt the knot on the back of his head. As close as he was to the explosion, he had no idea how he had survived.

He also had no idea how it could have happened. After Ria's infiltration, he'd doubled the watch. And still, somehow, someone had done this terrible deed. There were over thirty dead now and three times that number of wounded.

And still they dug. The entire roof and front portion of the wing had collapsed in the blast.

I did not listen to her. Ria had warned him, and he'd not listened. Certainly, some part of him wondered if she herself hadn't instigated this attack. And yet even as he thought it, he knew it couldn't be. She would not put him at such risk. Despite everything, she had still spent tremendous resources to concoct Jakob's cure-and he'd heard the reverence in her tone when she spoke of the Child of Promise, the Great Mother in their gospel. The very book itself lay open upon his desk, and already he'd marked passages that seemed to speak prophetically about his wife and son.

He looked to the pile of rubble, the devastated front third of the wing, and wondered again what kind of device could do this and how it could come to be here, in his forest.

A scout approached at top speed, his rainbow-colored uniform torn and smeared with ash. He inclined his head to Rudolfo and to Aedric, his face lined with worry. "We've found the mechoservitor."

Rudolfo felt his heart race. "Isaak?"

The scout nodded. "He's… nonfunctional."

Rudolfo's stomach fell away, and his head suddenly ached. "Nonfunctional?" He glanced to his left, where Charles labored under a makeshift tent, moving between two of the most damaged mechoservitors. Over half had been damaged in the blast, though most superficially. "Take the arch-engineer. Tell him it's Isaak."

The scout nodded and took off at a run.

Rudolfo sighed. "Gods," he muttered.

"Or devils," Aedric answered. "I have magicked the scouts, and they are scouring both town and forest, General. I'll wager that Machtvolk bitch has something to do with it."

Rudolfo shook his head. "I don't think so, Aedric."

But who? Whoever it was, he would find them and-

Another scout approached at full sprint. "We have them, Lord Rudolfo! They're alive!"

Rudolfo felt the wind go out of him. The world slid away, and his legs went to water. Gravity pulled him down and he went to his knees.

They're alive. The building rage slipped from his clenched fist for just a moment, and he felt his face flush as tears threatened. He blinked them away and realized Aedric's hand was upon his shoulder, firm and much like Gregoric's had been so many times before.

He heard himself breathing, and each gasp seemed a sob. He swallowed against it and forced himself to his feet. "Take me to them." He stared at his first captain, his grief suddenly frozen into resolve and anger.

Aedric opened his mouth and closed it. "Yes, General."

They made their way around the edges and then down a makeshift path through the debris. As they walked, Rudolfo fixed his eyes ahead.

I did not listen. I did not protect them. It was sharper than any scout knife, and it twisted in him. She'd proven to him how vulnerable he was when she snuck into his forest, into his home, into the very room where he met with her evangelists. Before that, she had sent her kin-raven, beseeching her sister to bear warning to him.

Another path that eluded him.

He found his footing and increased his pace as Aedric guided him by his good arm. Ahead, he saw the men and women gathered around Isaak. The metal man's head was twisted at an impossible angle, his chest cavity crushed and his left jeweled eye dangling free on gold wire. He felt another sob shake him. Then, he saw them lifting his wailing boy from the ruins, and Rudolfo faltered in his run.

The cry was wrong; it was agonizing pain. And the blood on Jakob's blankets wrenched Rudolfo at some deep place in himself that he did not know existed until now. He pulled away from Aedric and then sprinted ahead.

Now hands were lifting Jin Li Tam from the rubble, and when she looked to Rudolfo, he saw wild panic and grief upon her face. Two medicos intercepted Rudolfo. "No further, Lord."

"My son," he shouted, pushing against them.

"A ruptured eardrum, I'll wager," the River Woman told him, placing a hand on his chest. "Lord Rudolfo."

"I need to see them," he said.

"They will be fine. They need to be cared for, and you have work to do." Her voice was firm and it surprised him, though it shouldn't have. She'd pulled him from his mother and into the world when she was a younger lass.

Rudolfo looked past her and the medicos. Jin was being forced into a stretcher, her hands stretched out for Jakob. The River Woman followed his eye. "Give the child to his mother-she'll better soothe him until we can get the powders on him." She gave the Gypsy King another stern look and went back to her waiting work.

Rudolfo looked to Isaak. Charles had arrived and was running his hands over the metal man's chassis and head, checking the limbs. He saw the matter-of-fact manner with which he did his work and marveled at it. If I were to look at it as such, Rudolfo thought, how would I behave now?

He pondered for a moment and looked up to Aedric. "Bring Lysias over," he said.

Aedric gave him a puzzled look but heeded. He whistled to a scout and sent him careening through the rubble. Rudolfo knew the younger man wanted to ask-his father, Gregoric, most likely would have asked. And would've privately let Rudolfo know in clear words his opinions on the matter.

I miss you, Gregoric. Still, he saw his fallen friend in the face of Gregoric's son, and he knew that the father's strength was in Aedric.

Rudolfo looked to Aedric now. "How long to muster the West Brigade of the Wandering Army?"

Aedric's eyebrows furrowed. "A day, maybe two."

Rudolfo nodded. "Good. You'll call them up tonight after I speak with the two of you."

Even as he said it, Lysias approached. The general's eyes were filled with worry and red from smoke. "Lord Rudolfo? Are they safe, then?"

Rudolfo shook his head. "None of us is safe, Lysias." He paused. "General Lysias."

He saw the look of surprise in the old soldier's eyes. "Lord?"

"Swear fealty to me and mine, General, and serve my family and my people well." Something caught in Rudolfo's voice, and the words sounded foreign to him as he said them. "Build me an army to keep my borders," he said.

"You have my oath, Lord," Lysias said.

Rudolfo looked to Aedric. "Lysias will raise them up; the Gypsy Scouts will train them. Bear witness, First Captain."

"Aye, General Rudolfo."

"Until they are ready, the Wandering Army will watch out for us. I want the Western Brigade on the line in three days' time." Rudolfo wanted to close his eyes for these next words, but he knew he could not. It went against everything his people had believed these two thousand years in the forest, and he had to look them each in the eye as he said it.

"The borders of the Ninefold Forest," Rudolfo said, "are now closed to passage. Send birds at dawn to all, kin-clave and foe."

Aedric and Lysias exchanged glances. Aedric spoke first. "Are you certain, Lord Rudolfo?"

Am I certain? He heard the wailing of his son and the cries of the

frightened and wounded around him. He heard Charles cursing and grunting as he manhandled Isaak onto the stretcher with the help of two scouts.

He remembered the anguish in Jin Li Tam's eyes.

"Yes," Rudolfo said, letting the wrath show in his voice. "I am certain.

Chapter 8

Vlad Li Tam The sun rose behind him as Vlad Li Tam rowed the skiff into the harbor. Already, the scant remains of his iron armada built steam as they prepared to leave. Even in the dusky rose of morning, he could see the remnant of his family as they scurried along the upper and lower docks, moving the last of their lives back onto the ships.

Six months and so little to show for it. Yet, even as he said it, his heart felt full. These last nights, rowing out to where the ghost awaited, had added something indefinable to him-something he'd lived without for too long. The compulsion of it was frightening, especially given that this love he felt was for a twisting, writhing mass of tentacled light. Not for the first time, he wondered if perhaps something had happened to him those moments when he first encountered the d'jin, so fresh from his time beneath Ria's knife, with his hands upon the throat of his first grandson.

He sighed and worked the oars, his shoulders creaking with his increased activity of late.

They'd found nothing here, but there were sure to be clues elsewhere.

After all, there had been those ships. And unfamiliar, dark-robed men. And now, though his heart drew him to sea for other purposes, his brain saw clearly that whoever was out there was not coming back to this place. And despite the strange feelings that now pulled him, relentless as a tide, Vlad knew that discovering the nationality of those ships and those men meant discovering the true hands behind the fall of Windwir.

And behind the surgery that cut my family from the world.

It wasn't that these new sensations trumped that loss-or even mitigated it. No, the loss was there, and if his soul went to it he could feel the hollow ache, like a tongue to the socket of a lost tooth.

He slowed his rowing and watched the sun lift up from the ocean.

Then, he looked back over his shoulder to the docks, adjusting his pull on the oars to line up with where Baryk stood waiting.

As he slid alongside, the old warpriest grabbed the rope Vlad tossed and tied the small boat off. "We'll be ready to sail in two hours," he said. His brow furrowed. "Is it still called 'sailing' when there are no sails involved?"

Vlad shrugged and stood carefully, grasping the edge of the dock as he climbed out of the boat. "How are spirits?"

"Fine. Nervous. Excited." Baryk's chuckle was more of a bark. "Should I ask you that question?"

He'd told the warpriest about the ghost, uncomfortable with the telling but even less comfortable with leading his family off to follow such a flight of fancy without speaking to someone first. Someone he trusted; someone who would not think him utterly mad. And Baryk was a metaphysick, though moderate in his beliefs. The city-state he hailed from-Paltos-was one of few in the Named Lands that not only allowed but encouraged a religious system, the people worshiping a loose pantheon of the more benevolent Younger Gods. When the Androfrancines had been in power, they'd avoided that corner of the Outer Emerald Coast and had encouraged others to do the same.

"We know their ghosts are in the waters," Baryk had said. "I've not seen them myself, but I've heard the sailors tell of it. Your own daughter is named for them." Then he'd offered a reassuring smile. "Who am I-and who is anyone else-to question what you've seen or experienced?"

Vlad had been comforted by the man's response.

Now, he returned the chuckle. "It was a good night. But she was restless. I think she's eager to leave."

She. How did he know this? He blinked at his own words and bit his lower lip. He did know it. And not for the first time, he realized there were many ways of knowing a thing. He stood and stretched on the dock.

Baryk studied him. "You know that some of the older children are whispering about this. They know something is afoot. They've watched you watching the sea, and now these midnight rowings."

Vlad nodded. He did know this and he'd expected it. "Let them whisper. They will still follow."

"Aye," Baryk said, "they will, though they may quietly think you mad."

I think myself mad. But he didn't say it. He held that in and turned it over and over like a Rufello puzzle. It was possible-even likely-that he saw nothing at all there in the sea. Perhaps something had broken in him during his time of captivity and kin-healing. Perhaps he'd concocted a beautiful singing spirit to pull him away from his pain and into the deep waters where he could find some kind of peace. Perhaps he was in love now with the notion of forgetting beneath the waves. Regardless, he knew the power of perception, and if somehow he was wrong in what he saw and experienced, that would work its way out as he pursued it. He vaguely recalled a Francine arch-behaviorist who'd written a slender volume on the subject of hallucination as a means of the psyche healing itself.

"What they think," Vlad Li Tam said, summoning firmness to his voice, "is what they think. We leave as soon as the ships are loaded."

Baryk nodded. "I've seen to your things. They're in your cabin on

the flagship."

Vlad forced a smile. "Thank you, Baryk. I'll be in the temple until we leave."

Baryk clapped Vlad on the shoulder. "I'll see to the ships."

Vlad left his son-in-law and climbed the stairs slowly, inclining his head to those members of his family who passed him. He reached the top of the low bluff and climbed the marble steps up into the white building.

Once inside, he made his way to the top of the building, entering the large domed observation room on the fourth floor.

He walked to the railing and looked down, expecting vertigo and a memory of screams to overtake him and drive him to his knees.

Neither happened.

Vlad Li Tam stood still and listened. Outside, he heard the first whistles of those ships that were loaded and ready to depart.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly to the ghosts of his family.

Then he stood silent and listened for absolution in the stillness of the room. He waited, not even able to find his tears, until Baryk's runner found him and told him that the last longboat awaited him.

Then Vlad Li Tam turned his back upon those ghosts and gave himself to the chasing of another. Winters In the first days following the explosion at the library, the city of Rachyle's Rest was awash with panic, and Winters did her best to stay out of the way and help where she could.

Most of that help was filling in for Isaak to keep the work of the library moving forward while at the same time launching repairs.

Charles had hidden himself away with the broken mechoservitors, rarely leaving his workshop. The metal men that remained were already doing what they could to replace the volumes lost in that brief blaze, and fresh crews of refugee laborers had already cleared the rubble and begun repairs to the damaged wing.

Of course, it did not surprise Winters at all that even as they worked, the skies above the Ninefold Forest broke open and the first of the rains began to fall.

And it also did not surprise her that her first summons to the Seventh Forest Manor after the blast came in the midst of that first deluge. Careful of the gathering puddles of water and the mud sucking at her boots, Winters ran through the downpour in the gray of midmorning.

As she ran, she watched the city around her. Soldiers from the local brigade of the Wandering Army stood at key locations or patrolled the streets. And as she approached the manor, she saw a half-squad of scouts administering their powders, fading into the wash of water as they raced for the woods. They were running the forest

day and night now, she knew, enforcing Rudolfo's new edict and looking for any clues as to who caused the explosion.

The rainfall lightened as Winters approached the gates to the manor, and she nodded to the guards as she passed. The massive house loomed ahead, rising above the rooftops of the city. Five minutes later, she was barefoot, dripping wet and standing outside the door of Rudolfo's study, catching what water she could with a rough cotton towel.

The Gypsy Scout at the door ushered her in.

Rudolfo and Jin Li Tam waited in the sitting area with Aedric. Between them, a pitcher of wine and a platter of cheeses sat untouched. They stood as she entered, and Rudolfo gestured to an empty armchair near the fire.

She shook her head. "I'm soaked," she said. "I'd better stand."

"Nonsense," Rudolfo said. "It's only water. Join us, Winters."

She paused, suddenly mindful of their faces. All of them were bruised or cut, and each had dark circles beneath their eyes. Rudolfo's arm was in a sling, and he held the Y'Zirite gospel in his free hand.

Winters sat and looked to Jin Li Tam. "How is Jakob?"

She watched a mother's sorrow flush the woman's pale face. "He may lose some hearing from the ruptured ear, but otherwise, he's fine."

Winters nodded slowly and wondered why she'd been summoned. She suspected the book in Rudolfo's hand had something to do with it.

Rudolfo cleared his voice and she looked to him. "We are at a difficult intersection," he said, "and desire your input." He held the book up. "You've read this?"

Again, she nodded. "I have, Lord." She glanced quickly around the room and noticed with a start the look of subdued anger on Aedric's face.

Rudolfo continued. "It appears that my wife and my son feature heavily in this elaborate mythology."

"They appear to, Lord," she concurred.

Rudolfo started to move his broken arm, winced, then put down the book. He stroked his beard. "I've new word from your sister," he said. "A renewed pledge of aid and a… difficult… request."

"Not difficult," Aedric said, interrupting with uncharacteristic anger. "Unheard-of."

Winters watched as the two men made eye contact, exchanging silent words between them. Aedric looked away first.

"Difficult," Rudolfo said again with more firmness in his voice. He paused. "I've read it through three times and have reached the conclusion that if your sister truly believes this book she can in no way intend harm to me or my family."

Now Jin Li Tam interjected. "Still, they could have engineered this event merely to convince us of this. They provide Winters a copy of the gospel along with a warning. And then shortly after they supposedly leave our forests, this"-Winters watched her reaching for the right word-"attack takes place."

Rudolfo's eyebrows raised. "This attack would have killed you both if Isaak hadn't intervened."

Winters started, looking up. "Isaak?" She'd known he'd been damaged heavily-perhaps irreparably, she'd heard-in the attack, but she'd not heard this.

Jin Li Tam looked away, her voice quiet. "He put himself between us and the blast, then shielded Jakob and me from the falling stonework." When she looked back to her husband, her eyes were hard and narrow. "But it still could be a clever machination. Something intended to bring us to this very moment."

"This is my concern, as well, Lady," Aedric said.

"We are all concerned about this," Rudolfo said, "and yet." He paused, took a deep breath. "I think she is sincere. Gods know I might be wrong, but I suspect this new threat rises in the south, not the north. Esarov and Erlund have honored kin-clave with investigations of their own, cooperating fully with our own intelligence efforts. Pylos and Turam have not responded to our requests, but we did not expect them to. And Ria's newest message claims her scouts have taken three prisoners, magicked and fleeing across our Prairie Sea."

Machtvolk scouts in the Prairie Sea? She studied Rudolfo's face, knowing this could not possibly please him. Still, all she saw was a wash of weariness and something she thought might be resolve. Winters blushed when she realized their eyes had met and held for a moment. But when she looked away from his, red-rimmed and dark-shadowed, she realized in hindsight the other emotion she'd seen there. Fear.

The room became silent and Winters shifted uncomfortably in the chair, still feeling the water from her hair as it traced its way down her shoulders and back underneath the dress she wore. She wondered if she should say something, but even as she pondered, Rudolfo spoke again.

"We've called you here to ask two questions of you, Lady Winteria."

He speaks formally to me now, she noted. "Yes Lord?"

He took a deep breath. "I know your people have changed; I know your sister is a largely unknown factor. But I need to know: Do you believe she or her Machtvolk would do harm to my family?"

Winters thought about it, remembering the look of adoration upon Ria's face when she first laid eyes on Jakob those months ago,

and the same look upon the evangelists' faces when their Great Mother and Child of Promise entered the room during Rudolfo's audience with them. Then, she pondered the words of the gospel. When she looked up to meet Rudolfo's eyes again, she hoped her answer was true. "I do not believe they will harm you or your family, Lord Rudolfo. In this matter, I think their attempts to help are genuine. But I could be-"

He raised his good arm. "We all could be wrong," he said. "I only look for your sense of it. Of all here, you understand the more… metaphysical… aspects of your people."

She heard Aedric shifting and looked over to him. The man's knuckles were white on the arms of his chair, and she could see the care with which he guarded his facial expression. She looked back to Jin Li Tam and then Rudolfo. "Why do you ask, Lord?"

More furtive glances between the husband and wife. "Because," he finally said, "they've invited my wife and child to participate in a diplomatic mission behind their borders until such time as this new threat is identified and eradicated."

She felt the color drain from her face as her stomach lurched. "You're going to send them?" Now, Aedric's anger made sense to her, and she saw clearly how much more grave this moment was.

Rudolfo sighed. "If Lady Tam concurs. I've read the gospel. And though your people have been twisted into something very different from what you've known, I trust your judgment of them." He looked to Aedric, then Jin Li Tam again. "And we are uncovering evidence of a new, less careful network emerging from the war-ravaged south."

"I still believe this is folly, General," Aedric started, but Rudolfo cut him off with a hard look.

"Can you keep my son safe here, Aedric?" he asked, leaning forward suddenly. "Can you?" Winters heard the anger rising in the Gypsy King's voice, and it startled her. When the first captain said nothing, Rudolfo settled back into his chair. "I do not doubt for a moment that the Machtvolk are a threat to the Named Lands. But they do not at the moment appear to be a threat to us. Somehow, my house is tangled in their house and in their so-called gospel of a new Y'Zirite age." He paused. "And," he said, "their borders are secure. Their blood magicks are formidable."

Jin Li Tam looked to the two men. "It could not hurt for us to have a better sense of what is happening behind those borders."

As the woman spoke, Winters saw the careful mask she wore. She is mistrustful. "Then you will go?" she asked, her breath catching for a moment in her words. "You will take Jakob with you?"

Jin Li Tam nodded. "Aedric, too, along with a company of Rudolfo's best and strongest scouts."

Winters felt fear for them, cold as the rain that soaked her

clothing despite the fire's warmth.

"This brings me to my second question for you, Lady Winteria," Rudolfo said. "I will be frank. Your sister has asked that you accompany them. I believe you would be invaluable to them, but I could never command such a thing of you."

And now she felt the fear herself, remembering that day Seamus made his sobbing confession to her and revealed the mark upon his breast. And that later day when she raised the Firstfall axe to Ria, losing it and her people. He wants me to go.

"I concur with my husband," Jin Li Tam said. Winters looked up. The woman inclined her head, her red braid shifting across her shoulder. "Your aid would be indispensable. You know the territory, the people."

Winters took a deep breath, feeling the weight of this new information as it settled onto her shoulders. It brought back memories of the Wicker Throne she'd carried to the Spire the day she had announced herself as the Marsh Queen. She remembered its weight, remembered the blood she'd shed for it through those biting leather straps.

In the end it was not hard at all for her to decide. That memory pulled her shoulders straight and she sat up. Her eyes met Rudolfo's, and she inclined her head slowly toward him.

"Of course I will go," Winteria bat Mardic, queen of the Marshfolk, said. Petronus Petronus whistled his horse faster and blinked the sweat from his eyes. They'd pushed the beasts to keep up with Geoffrus and his ragged band of root runners, remagicking the horses at least twice now for speed and stamina as they rode east in search of Neb. If they didn't slow soon, they would kill the beasts.

He watched the ease with which Geoffrus took the terrain in a long-legged lope, wondering how long the man could run like that.

The scattered platoon of Gray Guard rode hard with the half-company of Rudolfo's Gypsy Scouts, the rainbow uniforms of the scouts contrasting with the ash-colored guard against the drab desolation of the Churning Wastes. The sun was high now, and it glistened off the glass hills and razored dunes of the decimated cities that once covered this land. It approached winter just two hundred leagues east, and here, the sky blistered at noon.

It had been years since he'd been in the Wastes, and there was a tragic beauty in it that he did not miss. It was a stark reminder of the Wizard King's wrath but also a reminder of the strength of those scattered survivors, gathered together under the leadership of P'Andro Whym to dig what could be saved from the ruins and ride west with it to the New World behind the Keeper's Gate. Both human achievements-a penchant for self-destruction and a tenacious will to

survive that penchant.

He heard a whistle and looked up. Geoffrus was slowing and motioning for them to do the same. He pointed north as he did.

Petronus slowed his horse and looked. There, across the landscape, four robed figures moved, tossing dust or steam up behind them as they went. They moved fast, faster even than the root moved Geoffrus and his men. They were perhaps a league away, and he realized suddenly where he'd seen that loping run before.

Mechoservitors. Running in the Churning Wastes. Running toward the Keeper's Wall.

Instinctively, he raised an arm, but they paid him no mind.

He'd read the preliminary reports on the findings at Sanctorum Lux and knew about the metal man who had deactivated itself-the remains had been gone when the landing party of Tam survivors and Gypsy Scouts reached that burned-out ruin. And he'd heard about their so-called dream, though he wasn't clear exactly what they meant by it.

Somewhere in the Wastes, Charles's first generation of mechoservitors worked at something secretly, and he suspected that this strange figure, Hebda, knew more than he'd revealed in the hallucinations Petronus had experienced. As Pope, Petronus had made it his business to know every office and every ministry beneath his sanctioned oversight, and he'd heard nothing of this Office for the Preservation of the Light.

But he'd known Hebda's name, though he could not remember why he did.

The farther he moved away from the Wall, the more clear his memory became, though it still confused him. And even as his memory cleared, the dreamlike episodes ceased. He'd experienced neither vision nor dream since leaving their camp. Still, he knew enough. They'd charted his course, and something inside of him strongly believed that Arch-Behaviorist Hebda spoke the truth-Neb was in danger, and Petronus was compelled to act.

He'd not talked to the boy since that last day he'd seen him, there in the crowded silk pavilion of the last Androfrancine Council, Neb shaking with rage as Petronus called for an Androfrancine to take Sethbert's life and thus claim the ring and robes of office. He'd known the boy would've stepped forward-the Overseer had killed Neb's father when he brought desolation to Windwir-and Petronus had taken lengths to spare him that vengeful path. He winced as he recalled the day he excommunicated Neb, after months of faithful service leading the grave-digging of Windwir with the grace and care of an academy general.

It broke me to break him. Petronus swallowed the pain of that

memory, trusting that he was right in the end-that the boy was made for more than backward dreaming.

Geoffrus and the others were speeding up now, and Petronus felt the heat of his horse between his thighs. Still, he whistled the roan forward and leaned low into the saddle.

As the landscape flashed past, he wondered what exactly they would find in the far east where these mechoservitors had run from. He wondered about the runners and he wondered about the mysterious man who doled out hallucinations and dreams like candies from a dark and hidden pocket.

And most of all, Petronus wondered if they would reach Neb in time for whatever it was that he smelled coming on the dead winds of the Churning Wastes.

Chapter 9

Charles Charles blinked into his magnifying glass and bit his tongue as he worked the tweezers, inwardly cursing the clumsiness that age brought to his fingers.

He'd lost track of time now, these past days blurring into scattered hours of sleep here and there and meals taken hurriedly to the side of his workbench and the metal body stretched out upon it. Rudolfo occasionally stopped in to ask after Isaak, and at least once, Jin Li Tam had also snuck in, magicked scouts warbling the air around her as they shadowed her every movement. He remembered that they'd asked questions of him, faces lined with worry; but he couldn't remember what those questions entailed now, nor could he recall the short, sharp answers he'd provided.

Initially, he thought he'd lost the mechoservitor. Now, he was convinced that the metal man would function, though he'd cannibalized the two others in order to accomplish even that much. The gears would whir. The bellows would pump. All of the mechanical parts would do their work.

But would it still be Isaak?

The fine, narrow strips of ancient paper-thin steel that comprised Isaak's scripting scrolls had confounded him with its twisted tangle-along with what else he discovered there.

Somehow, they had fused themselves around the sunstone that powered his boiler, and it was not a new development-it appeared to be the result of past trauma, perhaps left over from the Seven Cacophonic Deaths. That made the most sense. Until now, Isaak had refused Charles-and anyone else-access to his inner workings. He performed his own maintenance, using mirrors and tools from the pouch he kept nearby at all times.

It made sense. I would trust less, too, if I'd been used in such a way.

And now, with the work just moments from being complete, Charles wondered if his metal child would be… himself… when he fired the boiler and powered the scrolls. He frowned at the thought, exploring the odd emotion that snared him. He'd spent days bent over this mechanical, his back and legs and arms aching from too long on his feet, hunched over the work. Why? He'd not spent so much time over the others. Indeed, he'd scrapped them as needed to bring back this one.

Because Isaak is… special. This machine had wept for a ravaged city and had put himself in harm's way to save the lives of his-Charles reached for the word and found it-of his family.

He blinked again and suddenly realized his eyes were wet.

And now, if Isaak truly did still remain in that tangle of metal and wire, he would have to give him difficult news. And pass that same news to Rudolfo and the others.

The fused memory scrolls were functional, though Charles was uncertain exactly how that was possible. But the sunstone they were fused into now pulsed on borrowed time. There was no way to repair the hairline fracture Charles found there. And there was no way to replace the metal man's heart without also replacing the memory scrolls.

Sighing, Charles fired the boiler and waited for the steam to build. When Isaak whistled and hissed, he held his breath and hit the switch.

The bellows pumped, and the amber eyes fluttered open, rolling a bit as the shutters worked. The mouth flap opened and closed and the ear flaps bent. Closing the chest cavity, Charles spun the dial on the Rufello lock he'd installed there. He'd repaired all but the limp, and he'd added nothing extra but the lock. Knowing what this mechoservitor guarded so near his broken heart had compelled him.

He watched the mechanical twitch and listened for any grinding gears or high-pitched whistles that might betray yet more work. "Are you functional?"

Isaak sat up on the table and blinked. "Mechoservitor Three is functional and ready for duty."

Mechoservitor Three.

He felt his eyebrows furrowing. "What is your designation?"

"Designation Mechoservitor Three, Library Archives and Cataloging, Office of-" Isaak closed his mouth flap, then looked to Charles. The metal man shuddered, and he heard a grind within, followed by a popping sound. The jeweled eyes dimmed, then grew stronger. "I am Isaak, Father, but you know that."

Charles released his held breath and wiped his eyes. "I do know that."

Wisps of steam leaked from Isaak's exhaust grate. "Why do you weep, Father?" He looked around the room, saw the two mechanicals disassembled upon the other tables, and turned back to Charles, waiting for an answer.

What do I say? He wasn't sure himself. "I think I'm just glad to see you, Isaak."

"It is also agreeable to see you." Then, another pop, and once more the eyes dimmed and then brightened. Isaak surged to his feet. "The library," he said, his reedy voice laced with panic. "Lady Tam and Lord Jakob-"

Charles put a hand on Isaak's metal chest. It was still cool to the

touch but warming quickly. "They are alive because of you." He paused. "And the library is under repair."

Isaak looked to the other two mechoservitors. "And my brothers?"

Charles shook his head. "I salvaged what I could from them to repair you. It was a difficult decision. We'll recover what we can from their memory scrolls, but their damage was extensive."

Isaak blinked now, and Charles saw the water leaking from the corner of his eyes. "They are permanently nonfunctional?"

Charles nodded. "Come sit with me," he said, and motioned his metal handiwork toward the plain wooden chairs near his crowded bookcases and guttering stove.

He pulled his chair close to Isaak and put a hand on the metal man's leg. "I have more unpleasant news, Isaak." How do I say this? He tried to tell himself it was merely a machine, but he knew better. "Isaak," he said, then surprised himself with his next word. "Son," he added. And now the water returned to his own eyes, and he sat with it for a moment while the metal man waited. In the end, he came back to science, as he ever had from childhood on. "You are aware of the inner workings of mechoservitor technology and the use of sunstones as a power source for your boiler?"

Isaak nodded.

"And you are aware, I'm sure, of the unusual nature of your own scripting mechanisms?"

Long metal fingers made their way slowly to the door in his chest, found the Rufello lock and paused. Isaak cocked his head.

"I installed that to keep your secret safe. It is a complex cipher known only to the two of us," Charles said, then brought the conversation back to the news he could not bear to deliver. "Because of the fusing, your memory scrolls are inextricably intertwined with your power source."

Isaak nodded again. "Yes, Father. I believe it is a result of the spell."

Charles offered a grim smile. "I concur. You were certainly not designed that way." He sighed. "I will simply be frank with you, Isaak. Your sunstone is cracked and there is no way to know when it will break, but exertion and overheating could bring it about sooner." He waited for the words to register. "I cannot replace it without irreparably damaging your memory scrolls."

Isaak's eye shutters flashed, and Charles watched another shudder take the metal man. "When it breaks I will become nonfunctional."

Charles nodded. "And I will do everything in my power to find a way around that outcome, but as yet there is no clear path ahead of me."

Isaak said nothing for a long while. When he spoke, Charles heard

sorrow and resolve in the reedy metal voice. "I do not wish to lose who I have become."

No, Charles realized. I do not wish it either. He opened his mouth to offer some kind of additional comfort. He closed it when Isaak stood.

"I wish to ask something of you," Isaak said.

"Ask," Charles answered, and suddenly the thought that this metal child of his might someday run out of questions, run out of curiosity, run out of life-it opened a chasm of sorrow in him that he couldn't fathom.

Isaak stood. "I must get something from my room." He looked around. "May I have a robe, Father?"

Charles pointed to where a fresh scholar's robe hung waiting. He watched as the metal man pulled it on quickly and cinched its rope belt. Then, he waited and wondered what surprising question would come back to him.

Isaak was not gone long. When he returned, he extended a hand to Charles, and the arch-engineer reached for it. It was small but easily recognizable-a golden scripting scroll, rolled tight.

"I want to dream before I become nonfunctional," Isaak said.

Charles looked at it, turning it over in his fingers. "How did you come by this?" He recognized it, though at the time he'd thought it merely the work of the apprentice who betrayed him into Sethbert's hands two years ago. It had been fused into the memory scroll of the mechoservitor that he'd sent out last year in search of Petronus, the mechoservitor that had fled into the Churning Wastes. He'd read the numbers and symbols, finding nothing but the notes of an ancient love song.

"It was given to Nebios that he might give it to me. It is what my cousin called the metal dream."

Charles felt his eyes narrowing, remembering Neb's report on the other mechoservitor. They'd found nothing when they searched Sanctorum Lux just days after its supposed suicide-its body vanished without even a screw or bolt left behind to show it had been there. That mechoservitor had been dangerous-violent, even, damaging both Isaak and the Waste guide Renard and killing dozens of Erlund's finest Delta Scouts during its escape and flight east. "Nebios gave this to you? You've kept quiet about it for some time."

"I was… uncertain."

Charles sighed. "I'm also uncertain, Isaak. I would prefer to wait and study it more carefully." Perhaps run it on one of the others and-He caught himself, realizing what he did now. He didn't want to risk losing Isaak again. And if this truly was more than a simple song, if it was some kind of coded script dressed like a dream, there was no

telling what it might do. Isaak could have done this for himself. He didn't have to ask. He had the tools and mirrors.

He came to me because he sees me as his father. Charles felt an emotion that he could not quite label.

When Isaak spoke next, his voice was a reedy whisper. "I want this, Father."

Charles looked up and studied the amber eyes that stared back at him. Without a word, he stood and went to the worktable where Isaak had so recently lain lifeless and battered. He gestured to it, and Isaak stood and removed his robe, replacing it on the hook by the door. Then, he climbed onto the table and stretched out.

In silence, Charles spun the cipher into the lock and opened Isaak's chest cavity. He reached around and found the spool for incoming scrollwork. Carefully, he started the thin gold strip into the threading, then tightened down the scroll on its spool.

Finally, he closed the chest cavity and spun the lock. "Isaak," he said, "run scroll seven six three."

He heard the spool whir, heard the clacking of the metal strip as it began to unwind. Isaak seized for a moment, his limbs going rigid and his eyes lighting brighter than Charles had seen them. Then, the eye shutters closed and fluttered, the bellows wheezed, and Isaak slept.

Perhaps it is a dream, Charles thought.

Then, he went and sat by the fire to worry and wait for his metal son to awaken.

Because, Charles realized, that's what fathers do. Neb Neb used his scout knife to carve a roasted Waste rat he'd snared in the quiet hour before dawn. The crackling meat smelled sour on the morning air, but Neb's stomach growled at it.

He glanced back at the woman deeper in the cave. She was getting stronger and stronger. She'd polished off an entire rat on her own the day before, warning him between bites of his need to flee her sisters.

He was beginning to believe her. There was an earnestness to her voice that compelled him. So he did the math and factored his best guess of their speed beneath the magicks and hoped that his sense of distance here was accurate.

He speared the hindquarters of the Waste rat and slid it onto the tin plate he'd found in her pack. He carried it back to her and hunkered down to watch her eat.

She tore into the rat, peeling back the crispy skin to find the meat beneath.

He didn't wait for her to start this time. He brought it up himself. "I think we should leave tomorrow," he told her.

She looked up from the meat, her face smeared with grease. Her eyebrows furrowed, bending the symbols carved into her forehead. She finished chewing and swallowing. "Tomorrow will be too late. You've-" She closed her eyes in concentration. "Miscalculated."

Tomorrow. It was possible, he realized. He was not familiar enough with the blood magicks to know exactly how fast they made these women who supposedly hunted him. He'd factored them as faster than a horse, perhaps nearly as fast as a mechoservitor. He wanted to ask, but earlier questions had been deflected in her constant press for him to leave while he still could. If they really could arrive as soon as tomorrow, Neb needed to leave.

But what to do about this scarred woman? He could not leave her. His eyes fell upon her exposed leg, and when he averted them, he saw her boots and her pack. He felt the idea land between his ears like a stone in a well. "It is time for us to be frank with one another," he said. "Where were you going when the kin-wolves waylaid you?"

She looked up but continued to chew her food, her eyes hard.

He continued. "You called me an abomination, and you told me your sisters were hunting me to get to the mechoservitors," he said. "But what about you? You claimed to be attending other matters?"

"They are not your concern," she said in an even voice. "Your concern is to not be caught by my sisters if you love the light."

Her words rocked him back on his heels. "The light?"

"You want frankness, Abomination?" She gave him a hard look, then put down the tin plate. "The Whymers are not the only ones concerned with shepherding the light. My family was set to this work long before the days of P'Andro Whym. I've spent myself for it, even against my will at times, and stand now on the brink of failure because of a stubborn boy."

The emotion in her voice surprised him. It was raw, nearly desperate. And the ambush of her sudden forthrightness made him suspicious. "What happens if they find the mechoservitors?"

She shook her head. "I do not know. I only know that they mustn't, or truly the light is snuffed. And I must not be found, either, until I've finished my work."

He felt the bolt slide free in this particular Rufello lock. "You are working against them," he observed. "But who are they?"

Her words were carefully chosen and did not answer his question. "I had limited time to bear my message before this delay; my work is now jeopardized."

Neb sat back on his haunches, propping himself against the cool glass wall of the cave. He looked at her and felt himself blush as she returned the look. There where she sat, the blankets had fallen around her, exposing her scarred shoulders and the cotton sleep shift she'd

changed into that morning after bathing herself from a metal cup of water he'd heated. The memory of that intensified the heat in his cheeks as he recalled sitting at the mouth of the cave, listening to her behind him as he forced himself to watch the ruined city beyond their hiding place.

His eyes moved to her breasts without any effort on his part and he forced them away, hoping she didn't notice. He swallowed his sudden discomfort and forced himself to look at her face. It was regal, despite the scars, and she regarded him with an air that he found familiar.

But I find everything about her familiar. It was as if he knew her or should know her. The high cheekbones, the wide mouth, the long legs. The eyes were the right shape but the wrong color, and her red hair should be long and flowing and-

Neb gasped and wondered how it was he hadn't seen it until now. "You are a Tam," he said.

For a moment, she looked angry. Then, her features softened. "I am the thirty-second daughter of Vlad Li Tam," she said. "I have spent my life for this brief season, and if it is to mean anything, we must not be here when my sisters arrive."

He read earnestness in her face and voice and realized that he believed her. He'd read that Petronus, when he was young and Pope, could read a person's character by the line of their jaw. He wished he had that skill now, and wondered what he would see. She held her head high, the jaw straight and firm.

He looked to her pack and boots again, then looked back to her. "Can you run?"

She nodded.

His decision was made quickly despite knowing it meant he would not be meeting Renard. He looked toward the mouth of the cave, his mind's eye out in the east beyond the ruins where his friend pursued one of her sisters. He looked back to the Tam woman.

Their eyes met, and he willed strength into his, hoping it would lend power to his question. "Where are we running?"

Her nostrils flared, but she did not break eye contact. He watched her make her own choices regarding trust, her lips pursed for a moment. "The Keeper's Gate," she finally said, her voice low and steady. "I bear urgent word for Jin Li Tam, queen of the Ninefold Forest and Great Mother to the Child of Promise."

Nodding, Neb started calculating exactly how much time it would take for them to pack their belongings and leave this place to the kin-wolves.

Seven minutes later, they ran west. Rudolfo Cold rain soaked Rudolfo despite the cloak he wore, and he tipped his head to let the

water run from his hood. A chill wind found the gaps in the cloak and licked at the bits of skin it could find. He could read the weather here. Winter would come fast and harsh this year, and it made him nervous.

How do I raise an army in the dead of winter? Lysias assured him it would be fine, and his carefully drawn plans seemed to support the general's assertion. And Rudolfo had faced Lysias's men in the War for Windwir-of all the academy-trained officers he'd encountered, Lysias was the most formidable.

Trust, Rudolfo thought, is an exercise of the will. And he would trust this man to bring about what Lysias promised he could. By spring, the general claimed, the borders would be sixty percent controlled, eighty-five percent by the next fall. And each of the nine houses would have their own troops, supplemented by the Wandering Army as needed.

The thought of it both pleased Rudolfo and broke his heart.

A white bird, blurred by the darkness and rain, flashed past to land in his second captain's catch net. With a low whistle, they stopped and Rudolfo looked to his right.

Isaak and Charles rode side by side. He'd seen them together before, certainly, but something had changed between them since the events at the dedication. Rudolfo had meant to ask about it but had been buried beneath a mountain of maps and meetings and strategies, the meticulous planning that went into Jin Li Tam's upcoming diplomatic mission to the Machtvolk Territories. It had been as carefully considered as any campaign, and though his stomach knotted at the thought of it, Rudolfo knew it was the best path left to them for this time. His family would be protected-Ria's latest kin-raven had assured him of this, sworn upon the mark of Y'Zir that guarded her heart-and the Ninefold Forest would have eyes in a place no other Named Lander was permitted to go. The army Ria had raised now held a border as far south as the Desolation of Windwir.

So now, with Jin Li Tam and Winters leaving tomorrow, Rudolfo once more could exercise his trust, turning his mind to other matters.

It was not an easy task.

He looked again to Isaak and Charles. The metal man rode high in the saddle, mounted upon the strongest horse they could find for him. Wrapped in the robe, cloak and hood, he could almost be mistaken for a man. His metal hands were gloved, and his metal feet were booted against the cold and rain. All that betrayed his true nature was the amber glow of his jeweled eyes beneath the cowl and the occasional hiss of steam as it vented through the exhaust grate in his back. Beside him, also wrapped against the rain, Charles seemed small.

Rudolfo looked to his metal friend. "They picked a forlorn and miserable night for this," he said.

Isaak started, his gears whirring and clacking. His head swiveled, and when he spoke, his voice sounded distracted and far away. "I apologize for this inconvenience, Lord Rudolfo."

Rudolfo chuckled. "No apology required, Isaak. It is what it is." And what it is, is damned curious, he told himself.

The moon sparrow had returned not long after Isaak's functionality had been restored, urging them north under cover of darkness and storm. Somehow, these metal emissaries had crossed the Keeper's Wall to arrive in his Ninefold Forest, yet they had not passed through the gate his Gypsy Scouts now manned there. The foresters had worked out a new code and retrained a new batch of birds just for these communications, and they sat unused in their coops. "Still, I wonder what they're up to."

Isaak said nothing, and Rudolfo looked beyond him to Charles. The old man met his eyes for a moment, and Rudolfo read something there that he could not quite place. He knew when the arch-engineer quickly broke eye contact that something indeed was amiss. He knows something that he is not telling.

Looking back to Isaak, he opened his mouth to speak again, then closed it when Philemus spoke. "They are ahead. Four of them, robed and waiting. Scouts have secured a perimeter around them."

Rudolfo nodded. "Very well. Hold here unless we whistle for you."

"Aye, General," the second captain said.

Then Rudolfo looked to Isaak. "Are you ready?"

Isaak nodded slowly but said nothing.

Rudolfo nudged his horse forward at a walk, and the two followed. The forest around them was alive with the rainfall, and a shrouded moon offered no light between the clouds and the thick evergreen canopy. They rode forward in darkness until Rudolfo saw the amber lights ahead. When he did, he slipped from his saddle and led his stallion into the small clearing.

The four stood together, side by side, and steam rose from the heat of them. They'd run far, he realized, and yet had somehow circumnavigated the only pass across the impenetrable Keeper's Wall. Rudolfo waited until Isaak and Charles were beside him, and then he stepped forward. "Greetings," he said, "I am Rudolfo, lord of the Ninefold Forest Houses, general of the Wandering Army."

One of the mechoservitors broke ranks with the others and raised his hand. "Well met, Lord Rudolfo." The metal man looked to Isaak next. "Greetings, cousin." Then, last, he looked to Charles. "Father," he said, inclining his head.

Charles grunted and returned the nod.

As his eyes adjusted to the night, Rudolfo saw the differences between these mechoservitors and Isaak. They were more boxlike,

with harder right angles, and copper in color.

Isaak inclined his head. "Greetings, cousin."

"Do you serve the light?" the mechoservitor asked.

Isaak nodded. "I serve the light," he said. Then, he looked to Rudolfo. "And I serve this man and his family."

The mechoservitor's voice lowered. "Do you yet comprehend the dream?"

The dream? Rudolfo glanced at Charles. The old man looked away, and Rudolfo noted the question that required asking once they finished here. He would ask Isaak first, of course, out of courtesy for his friend.

Isaak's eye shutters flashed, and his voice took on a heaviness that sounded so unlike the metal man that Rudolfo found himself blinking. "I do not comprehend it," he said. "But I know that it requires a response."

"Yes."

Another mechoservitor stepped forward. "Even now the antiphon is being shaped. We are here to aid that work."

Rudolfo was not familiar with the word and set it aside for later conversation. "Return with us to my manor," he said, "and we will discuss this aid."

The mechoservitor looked at him, and Rudolfo saw something in those eyes, in the way the metal man held his head, that spilled uneasiness into him like ink in a pond. "Do you serve the light?"

Rudolfo cocked his head. "I do. I am restoring what I can of it by-"

There was gravity in the mechoservitor's tone when he interrupted. "The dream has shown us that the light cannot be truly preserved in a building of stone and wood. Your aid is not required." He looked to Isaak. "You have tasted the dream and we have come for you, cousin. Join us."

Rudolfo held his breath. He had not foreseen this, and judging by the look on Charles's face, the old arch-engineer had not expected it either. They both stared at Isaak.

Isaak's eyes flashed, bright and then dim, as his working parts clacked and whirred with this new information. "I cannot join you," Isaak said. Rudolfo heard the sadness in his friend's voice. "I have work to accomplish here."

Another of the four stepped forward, repeating the other's words. "The light cannot be truly preserved in a building of stone and wood, cousin. You of all our kind should comprehend this fully."

Rudolfo started. They know of his role in Windwir.

A gout of steam burst from Isaak's exhaust grate, and his metal plating rattled. "I cannot join you, but I will aid you as I can." The metal man looked to Rudolfo, and he thought for a moment he heard

pleading in his voice. "I believe Lord Rudolfo will aid you as well if you will be forthright with him."

More trust. And Rudolfo had no reason to offer it. Yet.

The last mechoservitor joined them now. "We run for the Marshlands to search the Book of Dreaming Kings." He looked to Rudolfo and repeated his companion's words. "Your aid is not required."

Rudolfo felt his frustration building and wrestled it down. "You are in my forests," he said in a low and even tone. "You may not wish my aid, but you should still desire my grace."

The mechoservitor's eye shutters flashed open and closed. "We will not long be in your forests and require only such grace as will let us pass in peace and secrecy."

Rudolfo looked to Isaak and Charles again. "And you think the Machtvolk queen will grant you access to her book?"

"We will not seek access from her." The mechoservitor dug into his robes, and Rudolfo felt wind nearby as his scouts drew closer. He whistled them to stand down as the mechanical pulled out a cloth-wrapped bundle and passed it to Isaak. "Should we fail," the mechoservitor said, "our task will fall to you or the antiphon will be incomplete."

Isaak took the bundle and looked at it.

"It is the only existing copy," the mechoservitor said, "and it should remain so."

The first mechoservitor spoke to Isaak now, even as Rudolfo opened his own mouth to speak. "If you change your mind the book will bring you to us, cousin. It is glorious to serve the light by way of the dream. We beseech you to reconsider and take your part in formulating the antiphon. We will not send for you again."

Isaak said nothing. And before Rudolfo could find his own words, the mechoservitors turned and sped from the clearing.

Follow them, he signed to the scouts surrounding them. At a distance, but do not breach the Machtvolk border.

He heard the faintest clicking of tongues to the roofs of mouths as the scouts set out. As they left, he looked to Charles and Isaak. "It seems we have much to discuss," Rudolfo said.

Isaak nodded absently, carefully unwrapping the book while shielding it from the rain with his cloak. It was an old volume, one that had somehow been spared the destruction of the Great Library.

"What book is it?" Charles asked, leaning in.

Isaak read the cover. "It is Tertius's Exegesis of Select Lunar Prophecies As Recorded in the Book of Dreaming Kings.

As if on cue, the rain around them let up as high winds pushed back the clouds enough to leak the moon's blue-green light over the

clearing. In the distance, Rudolfo heard the fading clack and clank of the metal men as they ran west, but the metal man before him captured all his attention.

Isaak looked at the book and then raised his amber jeweled eyes as if in prayer. "It requires a response," Isaak said as he gazed upon the moon. And there was such sacredness, such conviction in Isaak's voice that Rudolfo could not help but join his friend in staring at the sky. Above them, that same wind brought back the clouds, shrouding what little light they had as the rain once more began to fall.

Chapter 10

Petronus Geoffrus's men found the shallow grave just west of D'Anjite's Bridge, and only Petronus's insistence kept them from skinning the corpse they found there.

The sun was low and heavy with morning when he saw their quiet commotion in the camp, and he'd known instantly that something was afoot. Whistling for Grymlis and the first lieutenant of Rudolfo's Gypsy Scouts, Petronus had fetched his horse and followed the ragged band of Waste runners to their newest find.

They'd already exhumed the body.

Now, they stood at a distance, muttering and whispering, while Petronus and his men studied it.

It was a woman, her hair shorn and her yellow-gray skin scarred in a way that dropped ice into Petronus's stomach. He knew those markings, had seen them all too recently upon the skin of his childhood friend, Vlad Li Tam. She lay stretched out, her hands folded upon her chest and her eyes closed, dressed in a loose-fitting tunic and trousers of unfamiliar cut, wearing well-worn low boots made for running. Around her lay the scattered rocks that had covered her shallow grave. And though she'd been dead for some time, her body looked more asleep than not.

Grymlis bent over her while Petronus hung back. "There's no decomposition," he said. His large hands moved her head, revealing the deep bruising around her throat. "And her neck has been broken." He scowled. "It's a clean break. Something strong and fast."

Petronus glanced back to Geoffrus and his men. "Did you find anything else?"

Geoffrus shook his head. "Nothing, Luxpadre. But my men wish to assert to you the contractual clause regarding the fair division of found objects among our party as-"

Petronus cut him off with a stare to match the hardness of his words. "This is a woman, Geoffrus. Not a found object. You'll not desecrate her corpse."

For the briefest instant, Petronus saw rage on the man's face, and he noted the line of the man's jaw. He could do me harm, he realized. And then, the rage was gone, replaced by calm acceptance. "As you direct, Luxpadre, so I serve."

He looked back to the woman. She was young-perhaps the tail end of her twenties. And even before he ordered it, he knew what he would find. The cuttings on her face and arms, the symbols etched into her, told him exactly what he needed to know. "Open her shirt," he said.

Grymlis looked up, surprised, and Petronus watched the light spark in his eyes. He nodded, swallowed, then forced her arms from her chest. Then, he used his scout knife to cut the fabric open.

Petronus's hand moved to his own chest, fingers tracing the skin of his own raised scar through the fabric of his robe. There, just to the left of center, cut into her skin between her breasts, was the mark of Y'Zir. And surrounding it, swirling in line upon line of symbols, was a lattice of scars he could not read, though he caught their meaning well enough.

Grymlis slowly rose and stepped back. "What next, Father?"

Petronus looked to the sun. The day was young, and though they'd slowed their reckless pace somewhat, they had much ground to cover.

Runners in the waste, the man Hebda had said. This, he knew, must be one of them. But something had intercepted her, snapped her neck like dry wood and buried her here in the Wastes, even placing a white stone at her head in the custom of the Androfrancine funeral rites. The lack of decomposition made it impossible to know how long ago, but he suspected it had not been more than days.

He turned to Edrys, the first lieutenant of the scouts that rode with them. "Have the scouts walk the surrounding half league for anything they can find." He gave Geoffrus another firm stare. "You pull back your men, Geoffrus."

The Waste runner did not look at Petronus; his eyes never left the naked chest of the girl, and it was not the scar that caught his eye, not by the way he licked his lips. Disgusted, Petronus raised his voice. "Geoffrus," he said. "Pull back your men. We ride in two hours."

Startled, the Waste runner looked away from the girl and with a word to his ragged band, slunk away with them.

When only Grymlis remained, Petronus sighed.

"That one will be trouble before we're done," the Gray Guard captain said in a low voice.

He nodded. "He will; but for now, we need him."

"Still, he and his would cut our throats in our sleep. And if the rumors in Fargoer's Station have any truth, he'd make a tasty stew of us and our horses."

Petronus offered a grim smile. "You'll not let it come to that, I'd wager."

"Aye, Father," Grymlis said. "I'll not. My eye is on him." The old soldier nodded toward the body. "What do you make of her?"

"She's an Y'Zirite." Petronus looked at her, her arms stretched out and her chest bared, the purple bruising of her neck offsetting the pale Whymer Maze of etchings in her flesh. That one mark, central and larger than the rest, still pulled at his eye, and he felt the burning in

his own bosom from the scar Ria had cut into him when he lay dead upon the floor of that tent on Windwir's desolate plain. "But not of a variety I've seen before."

"And these are the runners this mysterious behaviorist was warning us about? The ones looking for the boy?"

Petronus nodded, remembering Hebda's words. "And looking for the missing mechoservitors."

Grymlis studied the body, and Petronus followed his eyes. "She was a tough one by the looks of her, but no match for whatever found her. And likely not much of a match for our men."

Still, Petronus knew there must be more to this than what lay before their eyes. And as if in answer, a low whistle reached his ears from the other side of a low rise of bent and mounded glass.

They joined Edrys where he crouched with his scout. "It happened here," the lieutenant said, pointing with his knife to the bare patch of ground. "She was carried to the place they buried her."

Petronus stared at the ground, barely able to see the marks so obvious to the Gypsy's trained eyes. "They?"

Edrys nodded. "There were three-maybe four of them-not counting the girl." He pointed to another nearby outcropping, blue and yellow and green, with wind-sharpened ridges. "They waited here and took her quickly by ambush, I suspect, without much fight." He stood and stepped carefully out of the clearing. "She ran from the east. Possibly in pursuit. Her stride indicates magicks of some kind were employed."

Yes, Petronus thought, remembering that night so long ago in his shack, when the blood-magicked assassin had attacked him and sent him into Ria's trap there on the Entrolusian Delta. The trap that had laid him out dead for his sins and brought him back in some twisted mercy he still could not comprehend, bending him into a miracle to prove their abominable gospel.

Grymlis must've been thinking in the same direction. "If she were under blood magicks, even a half-squad would be hard pressed to take her so easily-let alone four men."

Edrys stood. "Not men," he said as he looked to Petronus, and the realization dropped into his awareness like a rock in a well. He followed the scout's knife tip and saw the clear outline of a footprint.

"The mechoservitors killed her," he said, and his voice sounded flat in his ears. "The ones we saw moving west toward the Wall."

Edrys nodded. "It appears that way."

"Gods," Grymlis muttered.

Petronus inwardly cursed the broken skies of this place that kept the birds from finding their way. Then, he cursed their already small numbers and gave his orders anyway. "This," he said, "is something

new that we cannot overlook. Magick a runner and send him for the Wall. And gather the party-we ride immediately."

Then, as they moved off and away, Petronus turned back and made his way slowly back to the shallow grave and the girl who waited there in it. He was not sure if it was her nakedness or the starkness of the mark over her heart, but something compelled him, and he stooped to pull her shirt closed. With the scar covered, his eyes found the bruises at her neck and he imagined the quick, possibly even painless end she'd met in service to her faith in this desolate place.

Whatever the mechoservitors guarded, whatever they were about, they were willing to kill for it. And that was something utterly against the gospels and precepts that fueled their scripting. It unsettled him deeply.

And at the same time, he found himself quietly rejoicing.

Because if these are the same that seek Neb, he realized, there's now one less of them for us to deal with.

Grabbing up a stone in each hand, Petronus set about to bury his enemy. He worked quickly, feeling the sweat that trickled from his hairline and armpits tracing its way down his back and sides. When he reached that final stone, the white one that signified the light inherent in every human life, he hesitated.

In the end, the mechoservitors had more mercy than he himself could muster, despite the cold and calculated murder of their prey.

He remembered Ria's knife, remembered her words, and felt the burning of the scars she'd left upon him. Felt the despair washing over him when he realized just what his death and resurrection had accomplished after a life of service to the light of reason, the light of human knowledge and experience. Then, he looked to the place near the corpse's head, where the light-colored rock had lain before.

Hefting that stone, Petronus cursed and hurled it as far from the grave as his strength would allow.

Then he turned back to find his horse and press eastward with his men. Jin Li Tam Cold rain pounded them from a bruise-colored sky, and Jin Li Tam's hands kept moving beneath the rain cloak to where Jakob nestled close against her in his riding harness.

She was grateful that he rode so well, having heard stories from the house staff about the less amenable infants they'd encountered. And she'd been surprised-she'd been prepared for his ear to keep him screaming for the trip. But Lynnae's powders, administered through Jin's milk, seemed to cut the pain, and he'd ridden largely in silence.

Still, after so many days in the saddle she was ready for a real bed and a hot bath and a roof that wasn't canvas. She imagined little Jakob felt the same way, though he seemed content enough to pass

the time sleeping and nursing and looking about when the weather was less foul.

Aedric's company of Gypsy Scouts were all around them, a platoon's worth magicked and on the run, maintaining a perimeter that moved around her entourage as they rode for the Machtvolk Territories. They'd sighted the first of Ria's watchtowers the day before, tall and dominating the rugged terrain, and a kin-raven late in the evening informed them that they would be met today by an escort who would guide them into the territories.

It was hard to believe that she'd been here not so very long ago, deep in the winter, riding at the head of Rudolfo's Wandering Army. It had been much colder, but the rain seemed more miserable to her than the snow. Of course, growing up on the Emerald Coasts, where winter was a warmish rain, had made settling into her new northern home a bit of an adjustment.

She shifted in the saddle, sore from the ride and aching still from the blast. Isaak had shielded them from the worst, saving their lives, but she still bore the bruises and cuts. She expected a scar now on her thigh where a long sliver of pine had laid open the flesh.

Memory of that day brought a shiver to her deeper than the wet and cold.

A flash of brown to her left brought her head around, and she saw Aedric fishing a bird from his catch net. He whistled and raised his hand for them to stop.

She reined in, a hand once more creeping to Jakob's stomach to feel the warmth of him.

Just beyond Aedric, she saw Winters sitting tall in the saddle, though the girl's eyes were downcast. She'd been quiet of late, and her work with the knives had taken on a determined edge that felt something like banked anger to Jin's practiced eye.

When Aedric spoke, she met his eyes and returned the anger she saw there with cool aloofness. "The Marsher escort approaches ahead," he said, then corrected himself. "Machtvolk. Their queen rides with them."

She inclined her head, keeping her face masked. "Good."

She glanced to her right, where Lynnae rode. The girl had insisted that she accompany them. It had been months since she'd served as Jakob's nursemaid, but the bond between her and Jin and the child was palpable, and the River Woman had sent her with a full field kit of powders and scripts. Now, the woman rode swaddled in a rain cloak twice her size, her face buried in the cowl and her long curly hair spilling out from under it.

Behind them, the rest of the company stopped. Aedric would not

move them forward, Jin knew. Instead, he would make their hosts come to them-a subtle message.

They did not wait long.

The procession was larger than Jin had imagined it would be-a long train of horses and footmen-and she blinked in surprise.

The Marshers had never been a uniform tribe. They'd ever been a mysterious, mad and mismatched people, known for their rotting fur clothing and their salvaged or stolen weapons, tools and accessories. They employed no industry and lived lives of subsistence in their hovels, shoved far north against the Dragon's Spine Mountains apart from the nations of the Named Lands. They were known for brutal tribalism, and feared widely through the border towns of the northern forests, where skirmishing had bolstered a reputation they no doubt deserved. But there was more to them, she'd learned through her friendship with Winters. The young queen, now deposed and scrubbed clean of her people's mysticism, had shown her a quieter side to this people with their Book of Dreaming Kings and their longing for a new home to rise through the agency of the Homeseeker they believed would bring them there.

The procession that now approached bore no resemblance to the army she'd seen two years ago upon the plains of Windwir. Crimson banners caught the wind, and the riders and footmen alike wore dark uniforms, accented also in crimson and stark against the careful grays and browns and blacks of their face paint.

Who is supplying them? Certainly not the Delta city-states or their neighbors, Pylos and Turam. As they drew closer, she noted that while the uniforms were alike, they were ill fitting and the men who wore them did not appear entirely at ease.

The woman who led them pulled Jin's attention away.

"Hail, Great Mother," Ria said from the back of her stallion. She wore a long black rain cloak, and it hung open to reveal a silver breastplate. In her left hand, she raised the Firstfall axe. "Hail, Jakob, Child of Promise." Then she smiled and turned to Winters. "Hail, little sister."

The words were bitter in Jin Li Tam's mouth, but she said them anyway. "Hail, Winteria the Elder, queen of the Machtvolk Territories. On behalf of Rudolfo, lord of the Ninefold Forest Houses and general of the Wandering Army, I bear you grace and greetings in gratitude for your hospitality." From the corner of her eye, she saw Winters flinch at the words, and it pained her to see it. In that same glance, she also saw Aedric's tightly drawn mouth and the white knuckles of his hands upon his reins.

"Dark times bring you to us," Ria said in a quiet voice as she walked forward. "But you will be pleased to know that our

investigation is bearing fruit. I know it is a tremendous act of trust that you would even consider my invitation, and I assure you that every care has been taken for your comfort and protection during your visit among my people."

Jin Li Tam whistled her own horse forward, and she leaned close to Ria. "Swear it to me," she said, her eyes meeting the deep brown eyes of the Machtvolk queen. She saw Winters in the woman's face-there was no denying their kinship. Jin's eyes narrowed. "Swear to me on your gospel and on the mark upon your heart that we will be safe and that we will be free to leave your domain at the time of our choosing."

Ria smiled, and it was wide, inviting even. She reached beneath her robe and withdrew a slender volume, raising it into the air even as her hand went to her breast. "I swear it, Great Mother. I know circumstance indicates enmity between us. I know the wounds we've inflicted upon your family and upon your world are deep, but know this: They were the breaking of bones not properly set in an earlier wounding that now may be undone by the grace of the Crimson Empress." Her eyes moved to Winters and she repeated herself. "I swear it."

Jin Li Tam watched the girl's face redden under her older sister's gaze. Then, once more she looked to Aedric. The first captain looked resolved but angry. "Very well," she said. "I am satisfied."

And yet, I truly won't be until my son and I leave this dark, mad land you are making.

Ria nodded. "We will feast tonight in my new home." She looked again to Winters. "I think you will be impressed with our progress, little sister."

Winters said nothing as Ria turned her horse. Aedric whistled them forward, and they found themselves suddenly at the head of the procession, with the Machtvolk queen riding now between Jin and Winters as Lynnae and Aedric dropped back. The Machtvolk riders and footmen formed a wall to either side of the Gypsy Scouts, and together they moved at a moderate speed.

They rode in silence now, cutting north and passing between two watchtowers that loomed over a newly cut dirt road now mostly gone to mud. Ahead, Jin Li Tam saw low hills shrouded in mist that brushed the tops of the pine trees, and she thought she heard something from the forest there.

As they drew nearer, she became more sure of it and glanced to the woman beside her.

Ria's face bore quiet delight.

It was the sound of singing on the wind.

The song grew as they approached, and suddenly, the rain let up.

Scattered rays of sunlight perforated the cloud cover, though the air was still cold enough for Jin to see her breath.

She heard Jakob's muffled laughter and adjusted her cloak so that his tiny face could peer out. They'd learned early that he loved music, and one of her favorite new pastimes as a mother was pretending to sleep while Rudolfo sang quietly to their son.

Now, all around her, voices sang, and she felt the hairs rising on her skin as the lyrics became clear. And as they entered the forest and climbed into the low hills, she saw the people crowding the sides of the road, their evergreen branches raised high in trembling hands as they sang of a healed home through their Child of Promise, a Great Mother of daunting beauty and a Crimson Empress of infinite mercy who prepared even now for her bridegroom.

The song rose high into the winter sky, and Jin Li Tam realized suddenly that other voices joined in around them as the Machtvolk escort and even their queen lifted up their own voices.

Close against her breast, Jakob laughed in delight, and she realized suddenly that tears coursed her cheeks. But even as Jin Li Tam wept, she did not know if her tears were from the beauty or the terror of the overwhelming hymn that encompassed them. Winters Winters arose early and slipped out into cold northern air beneath a predawn sky flung wide with stars.

Of course, she'd not really slept. The events of yesterday had rushed at her all through the night. Even during dinner-a lavish feast of salmon, elk and wild mushrooms-the song echoed through her, punctuated by memories of Jakob's delight by it all and Jin Li Tam's unexpected tears.

She rarely sheds tears. Winters wished she were like that, too. But she wasn't. And what she'd seen and heard since her return to these changing lands had added more sorrow, more remorse to her shoulders.

On the surface, all looked well, but beneath it lay something darker. The watchtowers were up, but they watched both outward and inward. And the children, enrolled now in schools, were volunteering to take the mark as they learned a more balanced history of their people through history, poetry, drama… and the gospels. They were also training the children now in the blood magicks and scouting.

She'd heard this over dinner when the song wasn't pulling her back to their grand entrance into her former lands. And on that ride, she'd seen the evidence of other changes-there was more lumber being pulled from the forest; there were more houses and structures built and more uniformed men moving to and fro among her people.

Winters heard a sound behind her now and looked over her shoulder. She saw one of her sister's guards following at a distance

and behind him, a Gypsy Scout that kept to the darker patches of night.

She let her feet carry her, and somehow, despite the changed landscape, they found a familiar path and bore her to the caves she'd once called home, the caves that stored the Book of Dreaming Kings and held the Wicker Throne. The heavy oak doors were closed now, and when she saw the guard there, she paused. He stood in shadows cast by the watch lamp on its post and stepped forward when he saw her approaching.

She stopped, unsure of what to do or say. Suddenly apprehensive, she glanced over her shoulder again. The men that followed her had stopped as well.

"Is the way to the Book closed, then?" she finally asked.

The guard's eyes narrowed. "Yes."

She studied him, finding him suddenly familiar. He was perhaps ten years older than she was, and though the face paint bent his features, she was certain that she knew him. "You are one of Seamus's grandchildren."

The guard nodded but said nothing. He stepped farther into the light and waved to the guard that followed her. Positioning himself so that her body was between him and the others, his hands moved quickly and her eyes were drawn to them.

Hail Winteria bat Mardic, true queen of the Marsh, he signed to her. I am your servant, Garyt ben Urlin.

Winters blinked, his words overpowering her. She opened her mouth to speak, remembered herself, and willed her own hands to move into the house language of Y'Zir. Grace to you, Garyt.

"These caves are closed by order of Queen Winteria the Elder," he said aloud. And his hands flashed again. We may bear the mark on our bodies, but we do not all bear it in our souls.

She felt the heat in her face before she felt the water in her eyes. She remembered these words-she'd said something similar to Seamus on the day of his sobbing confession. But these were not words of comfort spoken into shame. They were words of loyalty and commitment. She felt a tear break loose. "Thank you," she said.

Turn now, she willed herself. And she did. She turned and took another path her feet remembered. The landmarks had changed, but she still found her way. At last, she stood in a wide, bare patch of ground near the river. It was a place she'd come to when she needed to meditate upon the dreams she'd had until just a few months ago.

She tried to remember those days spent in meditation but found the memory of them elusive. Instead, her mind was filled with the song and the children that took the mark and those doors now closed and guarded where her book of dreams lay hidden. She'd seen and

heard so much the day before and had assumed it meant her people had wholeheartedly embraced this new way of life.

But Garyt hadn't, despite the mark he'd taken and the uniform he wore. And now she was certain there were others like him.

Drawing her knives, Winters balanced them in her hands and shifted on her feet. Overhead, the stars wrapped themselves in rain clouds to leave her in darkness. The sound of the river's slow current mingled with the soft and distant hoot of an owl.

Winters drew in her breath and held it.

All is not lost here, she realized.

She brought the knives up, held parallel to her forearms, the edges facing out. She moved her legs apart and slowly released her breath, remembering the form that Jin Li Tam had taught her.

Then, Winters began to dance and in that dancing, laid aside her tears.

Chapter 11

Vlad Li Tam Vlad Li Tam stood in the bow of his flagship and squinted against the fading light. He'd taken to sleeping during the day so that he could spend his nights here, watching.

So far, their penetration into the deeper waters of the Ghosting Crests had been uneventful. And while his children had finally seen the anomaly that their father was so utterly fixated upon, they still did not fully comprehend the depth of his obsession.

Not obsession, he told himself with a sigh as he scanned the waters off his bow. Love.

But even as he thought it, he knew it was ridiculous. Yet he felt the mark of it on him as real as the scars that Ria had given him. His heart raced when he stood here, waiting for his ghost to appear. His hands were clammy. His mind was filled with the image of her graceful movement in the water, and when he tossed in his cot and tried to sleep, it was the song that emanated from her that kept him awake. No matter where he went upon his ship, inevitably the sunset found him here. Waiting.

Because she draws me.

More importantly, he suspected that she was aware of her pull upon him and used it now to move him and what remained of his family southeast, farther into the Ghosting Crests than any Named Lander had sailed.

The stars throbbed to life above him as the sky blurred from purple to deep charcoal, and as he watched, the moon lifted itself into the sky-a sliver now but enough to light the water. As the day slipped past, the noise of the crew dissipated and the night noise of wave and clanking engine took over.

Here she comes, he told himself, and he felt it on his skin, in the tiny hairs within his ears, as her song started up beneath the water. A patch of ocean shimmered and undulated ahead, and he clung to the railing, leaning forward.

He watched as she moved through the water, tendrils of light trailing behind like hair. There was a grace about her that he'd never seen before, and once more, he felt his heart aching and felt that compulsion to join her.

I have become a foolish old man. And even as he thought it, he watched as she abruptly changed course and struck south. He raised his hand to the pilothouse behind him and pointed in the direction she raced, waiting for the ship to turn along with their guide. Slowly, he felt the list as the ship bore hard to starboard.

After an hour, she was back and changing course yet again, this

time heading due east.

He motioned to the pilothouse again and heard the engines groaning as they increased power and turned the ship. He gripped the railing and let the wind catch hair he'd been too distracted to cut and a beard he'd been too unfocused to trim. Ahead, as the ocean around and ahead grew darker, he watched his ghost in the water.

The d'jin slowed enough for them to keep up, adjusting course here and there as needed, and Vlad Li Tam stood watch and counted the hours as they raced over a placid sea.

The sky was lightening when they finally slowed, and he watched as the blue-green lights swung in a wide circle ahead of them. Squinting ahead, he saw something vaguely outlined in the water, and he called it out for the watchman and pilot.

As they slowed and approached, the d'jin rolled and broke the surface, illuminating the small drifting object with the glowing tendrils of light.

It was a lifeboat.

Behind him, the ship went to third alarm and he heard his family scrambling. Before the flagship's longboat slapped the waves, the d'jin had darted off to the southeast again, and Vlad knew that she would not be back until the next nightfall.

Sighing, he left the bow and moved to the port side where he could watch. He saw Baryk, bare chested and wearing silk sleeping pants, and approached.

"Your ghost has found us something," the warpriest said.

Vlad Li Tam studied the water below, watching as his men, illuminated in the light of their lantern, threw their hooks and drew the drifting boat to their own. "Yes," he answered, though his voice sounded more distant than he'd wanted it to. "She has."

He heard excited voices carrying up and across the water, but he wasn't able to pick out any of the words. He saw them scrambling into the boat and heard their gasps at what they found there.

Two men manned the oars of the lifeboat and steered it toward the flagship. The longboat followed after, and when they reached the lift, Vlad leaned over the railing. "What have you found?"

His fifty-first son looked up. "The boat bears the markings of the Kinshark." Lying in the bottom of it, Vlad saw a vague shape that took form as the longboat approached with its lantern, and found himself gasping with surprise as well.

What have you brought us, my love? He blinked at the shape, uncertain of his eyes.

There, stretched out cruciform, lay a broken metal man in Androfrancine robes. Rudolfo A light snow fell in the northern reaches of the Ninefold Forest, and Rudolfo shrugged the flakes from where

they gathered in his cloak. The morning air was still and heavy with the smell of wood smoke and pine. It was cold, too, carrying his breath away in clouds as he walked his woods in the quietest hour between night and dawn.

Behind him, the camp stirred to life as Lysias's sergeants moved among the recruits with their pine switches, slapping buttocks and thighs as they went about motivating the men to a more eager wakefulness. Already, the Gypsy Scouts were up and loaded-as was Rudolfo-and this morning they would ride ahead of the battalion so that Rudolfo could see their discovery for himself.

Just days on the heels of Jin Li Tam and Jakob's departure, his second captain, Philemus, had brought word of what his scouts had found after days of chasing the metal men. He'd been sipping a pear wine that was nearly too sweet for his palate and pushing his fork through a rice-and-venison dish that seemed flavorless when the officer was ushered into Rudolfo's private dining room.

"We've found where they were running," he'd said. And even in that moment, Rudolfo could see on the man's face that he would be packing and riding out himself. The next day, under the cover of a training exercise with Lysias's army, he and an elite squad had set out for the far northern reaches of his territories.

Normally, Rudolfo relished those times he spent away from the manor. He'd always equated it with freedom, but lately he'd found himself counting security as a higher value than liberty. More and more, his guarded manor and his Gypsy Scouts felt safer to him than the wide open expanse of the forest his forefathers had claimed for their people two millennia ago. And everywhere he went, he carried a knot in his stomach and the dull ache of tension behind his eyes.

Picking his way carefully across the new-fallen snow, he tried to find solace in the morning but found worry instead. True to her word, Ria had welcomed his family into her lands-her entire people had welcomed them, it seemed. And she'd also sent what fruit they'd harvested in their investigation. Scraps of intelligence, cut no doubt from the prisoner they'd taken, that pointed south to the coastal nations. The War for Windwir had begun that strain, and then the events last winter-the assassinations and the resulting Council of Kin-Clave-had further eroded their relationship with those nations. The Delta continued a kin-clave on paper, largely forced by Esarov and his compatriots there in the Governor's Council. But it was becoming clear that the attack upon his family and his library was a well-orchestrated operation by allies now become enemies in the madness of these dark times. And he could see why these friends had become enemies. His family and people were the only ones to have profited from the desolation of Windwir, and the rise of the Machtvolk and their

demonstrated kin-clave with the Gypsies surely pointed toward collusion. The clear evidence that it was all the product of a carefully crafted Tam intrigue, right down to the Y'Zirite resurgence with its gospels, shrines and evangelists, was not enough.

Closing his borders and raising the army would not be enough, he realized, and that truth frightened him.

He heard a low whistle behind him and turned. Philemus slipped from a darker patch of the forest. "The scouts are ready, General."

Rudolfo sighed and forced his mind back to their present dilemma. Mechoservitors passing through his lands… and what his scouts had uncovered far to the north, at the foot of the Dragon's Spine. "Very well," he said, turning back to the camp. "Let's ride."

They rode out before the sun rose, their horses magicked for speed and strength, hooves muffled by the River Woman's powders. His arm ached with each passing league, and the air grew colder as they climbed the wooded foothills at the base of those impenetrable mountains.

By the time they arrived, the sun was a white disk veiled in gray and the snow had let up. They left their horses behind with a handful of scouts and slipped into a narrow canyon only marginally hidden by drifts of fallen pines and displaced rock.

The lieutenant whose men had pursued the mechoservitors to this place led the way, with Philemus and Rudolfo close behind. The uneven ground and the patches of ice made it slow going, especially with only one hand to steady himself. Rudolfo noted that the officer was careful to match his pace to that of his king. He smiled at this.

As they made their way deeper into the canyon, the walls narrowed, blocking out the white sky above. The ground sloped downward as they went, and the temperature dropped until Rudolfo saw crystals of ice forming and his feet found slick patches. The narrowing corridor twisted and turned until it finally spilled out into a large cave lost in shadow. One of the scouts lit a watch lantern and unshuttered its light.

Rudolfo didn't realize he held his breath until he released it and saw it clouding the cold air. In the center of the cave, he saw something out of place, and it took a moment for him to place it.

It was a large, round steel door set into the floor and propped open. Shattered fragments of granite lay around it, and it was obvious to Rudolfo that the hatch had been closed and hidden away beneath the rock floor of this place until recently.

Moving forward on careful feet, he leaned in and let his eyes follow the limited reach of the lantern's illumination. Stretching below, lost in shadows, a steel-lined well penetrated the cave's floor. Rudolfo squinted at strange shadows, realizing suddenly that they

were rungs set into the side of it, vanishing down into shadows.

"Gods," he whispered. And the well swallowed his words, the echo of them drifting back to his ears.

He'd wandered these hills since early childhood and had probably stood on this very spot.

Philemus looked from Rudolfo to the scout who had led them in. "You tracked the mechoservitors here?"

The lieutenant nodded, and in the lantern light, Rudolfo noted the blush rising to the man's cheeks. "We did." His eyes darted to his king, then looked away. "We could not keep up with them. They were gone by the time we reached the cave."

Rudolfo nodded, then stooped to pick up a loose chunk of granite. Stretching his hand out over the well, he released the rock and leaned in again, cocking his ear.

Silently he counted the seconds until far below he heard the muffled clatter. Then, he crouched and looked at the rungs set into the side of the shaft.

Philemus crouched beside him. "Does it lead where I think it leads?"

Rudolfo turned to his second captain. "I suspect it does."

An underground route to the Marshlands. He knew that the Dragon's Spine was laced with caves, but this was different. Someone had built this passage. Someone had hidden it here beneath the stone long ago. The metalwork of the hatch and walls was of a kind he'd not seen before, and he stretched out to touch it. Warm to the touch and pitted from time.

"This," Rudolfo said to Philemus, "may be an unexpected gift."

"It could be," Philemus agreed. "If they really were bound for the Marshlands."

But Rudolfo doubted they would lie about that. Even the book they'd given Isaak pointed to the Marshlands. Tertius was the renegade Androfrancine scholar who had educated Winters.

"I'm certain they were." Rudolfo touched the metal surface once again, surprised that it was so warm despite the cold of the day.

An unexpected gift indeed. But what to do with it?

Suddenly, he remembered the first time he'd discovered one of the many secret passages and rooms scattered throughout the nine forest manors he'd grown up in. He'd been six and playing spymaster with Aedric's father, Gregoric. He'd leaned against a section of shelves in his father's library, discovering a knot in the pine that seemed out of place, one that moved to his touch and unlocked a hidden panel in the wall. He'd spent an entire summer finding every door, every passageway, every hidden ladder and stairwell he could find.

Rudolfo smiled at the memory.

This is not so very different. He looked at the men who stood with him. "This remains secret," he said in a low voice. "I want a perimeter kept at all times and guard stations at and in the cave. Use magicked scouts. Bring Lysias in and show him; I want a training ground for the new army established nearby and two companies of scouts deployed to assist." He slowly raised himself to his feet, his eyes never leaving the well. "I want couriers to the mines in Rudoheim and Friendslip-five seasoned men from each."

Philemus raised his eyebrows. "Miners?"

Rudolfo stroked his beard and nodded. "And I want two of Isaak's mechoservitors brought up. If they do not have cartographic and geological familiarity then Charles should script them for it based on whatever we have in the library catalog."

The Second Captain nodded, and Rudolfo saw the understanding dawn in his eyes. "Aye, General."

"I want a half-squad assigned to each miner," Rudolfo continued, "and I want mapping shifts around the clock. "If this is a gift-if it truly does give access to the Machtvolk Territories-I want to know everything about it." He paused. "And I want our neighbors to know nothing."

"I'll see to it, General," Philemus said, inclining his head.

The others left first until only he remained, with the scout who bore the lantern.

Rudolfo looked down the well once more, then turned away from it. There was a day, he realized, when he would have stayed and commanded this effort himself. He'd have even climbed down the well and set about exploring what lay below with his men. But something had changed. He wished he could say it was the investigation into the attack on his family, but it would only be partially true.

After half a lifetime of security, I no longer feel safe.

No, he remembered, not quite half a lifetime. He reached back and took hold of that first day he truly felt unsafe, there on the grass as he held his dying father while Fontayne's mob of insurrectionists shouted curses upon his family.

Even then, he'd laid hold of every resource, every possible tool or weapon to root out the insurrection that House Li Tam had sown among his people. He had not stopped until every last bit of that vile weed was eradicated from his forest. And he'd watched every last one of them find redemption beneath the blades of his father's Physicians of Penitent Torture. Each penitent named three more, and in the end, peace and order returned to him and to his father's lands.

Rudolfo had not stopped until he felt safe again.

As he left the cave and started his slow climb back into a snow-flurried day, the Gypsy King knew it would be the same this time as

well. Because they'd tried to take his family from him for a second time, and it sparked something deeper than the loss and fear. It sparked anger.

I will not stop until I feel safe again.

And for just a moment, Rudolfo thought he smelled salt and blood upon the wind. Neb They ran beneath a crescent moon, its dim blue-green light wavering over ridges of molten glass and gray barren slag. Neb steadied the girl as they forced their legs to carry them, powered by the root they chewed. They'd be out of root soon, he realized. With the two of them chewing it, his supply was running dangerously low.

They ran by night, hiding themselves by day as best they could, finding the ruined pockets in the ground or hills where they slept fitfully before waking to run again.

They pressed westward, zigging and zagging across the landscape.

As they ran in silence, Neb tried not to admire his companion's graceful stride. He'd tried to bring more conversation out of her, but she'd been close-mouthed since that afternoon they'd set out. He'd not even been able to wrest her name from her.

A pack of kin-wolves howled a league or two north of them, and Neb steered them south. He could feel the strain of the run in his feet and calves, the solid jarring of his lower back as each booted foot found its purchase in a long and stretched-out stride. He glanced to the woman again.

She ran with her head up and moving slightly side to side, and if her shoulder pained her, she didn't show it. Her long legs stretched out beside him. She wore her pack high on her shoulders, cinched down for easy running, and if she'd had her iron knives upon her narrow hips, she'd have looked the part of a scout.

They put three leagues between them and the wolves before he whistled them to a stop near a patch of scrub they could use as cover. Neb drew his canteen and passed it to her first, admiring the long line of her neck as she tipped back her head and drank from it.

I cannot take my eyes off her. It stirred something in him-guilt, he thought. He'd tried to hang on to the image of Winters with her freshly scrubbed face and her clean dress, but he couldn't lay hold of that dream. He tried to draw from memory the last time he'd stood close to her, felt her hands and mouth upon him, but it had been most of a year since he'd kissed her good-bye there in Rudolfo's garden. And this thirty-second daughter of Vlad Li Tam was here with him now, her face and form filling his eyes and the sweet smell of her sweat in his nose.

The thought of her made him blush, and he cursed himself for it, hoping she would mistake the red in his ears for exertion.

Behind them, the wolves howled again, and Neb turned his

thoughts away from the girl and to their westward flight. There was only so much care they could take along the way. But he'd killed prey and left it where he could, hoping the blood would draw kin-wolves to cover their flanks. He'd also poured taint-salts into the scarce watering holes they passed. Anyone who drank from them over the next three days would find themselves incapacitated by dysentery. Even the girl proved her craft, giving him tips on how to quickly erase the evidence of their passing every ten leagues or so. "But understand," she had said, "that my sisters will also know these tricks and will know to look for them."

He looked behind them, watching the blue-green as it danced over glass and stone. "We should cover our tracks and turn south for a bit."

She passed the canteen to him. "I agree." Her brow furrowed, and when it did, her scars shifted.

He lifted the canteen to his lips and took a long swig of the tepid water. It tasted like copper in his mouth, and he tried to remember that last cool, fresh drink he'd taken. It had been months ago, when he'd been recovering with Renard's people. Even then, it had not been the sweet, cold water of the Ninefold Forest.

They covered their trail a half league behind them, established a false trail northwest and then turned south, chewing yet another bit of the root to carry them forward. As the juice took hold, Neb felt the elation seize him and gave himself to his pumping legs.

When the morning slipped upon them, they hid themselves in an abandoned Waste rat warren tucked in a crevice of pockmarked ancient stonework. The woman curled up and fell instantly asleep, and Neb watched her for a while, pondering her. She wasn't a Marsher, despite her use of the blood magicks. Her accent betrayed her even as her posture and appearance betrayed her kinship with House Li Tam. He dug into his pouch and withdrew the phial, opening the lid and sniffing the foul contents. Somehow, she was able to survive her use of them-unlike the Marshers, if what he'd heard in the Gypsy camp near D'Anjite's Bridge held true.

His eyes caught her again where the blanket fell free, exposing her bootless calf and foot. He forced them away again and tried to conjure up Winters's face.

I cannot remember her. After so long sharing dreams with her, she'd become a constant companion. Yet so quickly, she faded. He found the fickleness of his memory frustrating. He replaced the blood magicks, and his fingers lingered over the cloth-wrapped kin-raven. He pulled it out, careful not to let it touch his skin.

Holding it in the palm of his hand, Neb let the cloth fall away, exposing the black stone carving. He'd thought of it often since his

first experience with it but had not let himself even bring it out.

"What are you doing?"

Her voice startled him and he jerked, spilling the kin-raven from the cloth and onto the floor. Without thinking, he snatched for it even as her hand found his wrist.

She cried out. "Don't-"

But the rest of her words fell away as his skin brushed the dark bird. Suddenly, he spun away and found himself in a darkened room that smelled like lavender. Winters stood at the foot of a bed, unbuttoning her dress and lifting it up over her lithe form. Her breasts had grown larger and her hips were more pronounced, and Neb found himself suddenly-

– in a great white tower high above a deep blue sea. An enormous brown moon filled the sky, and beside him, Isaak clacked and clicked in time to the song that surrounded them, his eyes flashing bright and then dull. Neb felt the reverberation of the canticle lifting the hair on his arms and neck.

"Neb?" the startled metal man asked. His eye shutters flashed, and before Neb could answer, he stood on a hillside, looking out over a sea of glass. The thirty-second daughter of Vlad Li Tam stood beside him as winds from the north and east rushed down upon them and-

– his father cried into the black stone he lay stretched out upon. "Hold fast, my son," his voice rang out. "Petronus rides for you."

A sharp pain in his wrist caused him to cry out, and he released the kin-raven. He looked up and locked eyes with the woman, his mouth falling open. Her face was washed clean of any expression, but her eyes were fierce. She twisted his wrist again, and he tried to twist himself with her. As he did, her other hand shot out and snaked the thorn rifle from the loose grip of his left hand.

She moved fast, and he found himself suddenly falling backward as she raised the rifle and pointed it at his chest. He saw her fingers stroke the thorn bulb, and he suddenly realized by the way she held it that she knew the weapon even better than he did. The bulb undulated beneath her touch, and before he could say anything, she squeezed two thorns into him.

"What are you-?" His tongue filled his mouth even as his arms fell heavy to his sides and the sudden weight of his body dragged him to the ground. She blurred ahead of him, her face still a mask, her eyes now shining emeralds so sharp that they could shred him at a glance.

"I'm sorry, Nebios," she said as the venom took hold and pulled him down toward thick, warm darkness.

The last thing he saw was her hand stretching out to take hold of the tiny black token. And the last thing Nebios Homeseeker heard before that dark swallowed him was her voice, low and suddenly

sounding relieved.

"I have the Abomination right here for you, my sisters," she whispered to the kin-raven. "Come to me."

Chapter 12

Charles Charles put down his screwdriver and lifted the tubelike monoscope by its leather harness. Outside, a steady snow fell, and the afternoon light that struck his work mirrors was barely enough to see by.

Of course, he could never tell if it was the lack of light or if perhaps it was just his age finally creeping home after years of squinting over his handiwork or over the words and specifications his order had dug from the ruins of the Old World and the worlds before that.

He pulled the monoscope over his head and cinched down the straps, blinking into the telescoping device as he spun gears to let more light into the tube and to adjust the lenses. He'd polished the Firstfall metal yet brighter before lining the monoscope's interior with it.

He turned to the caged rat and dropped a bit of raw meat, finely coated with a pinch of scout powders, in front of the sleeping rodent. It started, grabbed up the bit of venison and started nibbling.

The magicks took the rat quickly, and unfamiliar with the sensations, it launched itself against the sides of the cage, shaking it with the sudden burst of strength even as it warbled out of focus and then became the faintest blur. Charles tipped his head so that the monoscope was pointed at the cage, aware of how heavy it was as it pulled at him.

They weren't the blood magicks that the Marshers were using these days, but Charles hoped it was a close enough approximation to them. If so, he had accomplished a critical aspect of this work: The rat, now settling down and returning to the meat, was blurry but visible in the reflection cast into the silver of the scope.

Of course, the awkwardness of the device was another matter.

This would be improbable-maybe impossible-for a scout to wear in combat. He would turn himself to solving that problem next. For now, at least he knew it was functional and could be used for observation, even from a respectable distance.

Charles moved across the room and turned back. Closing his left eye, he squinted into the tube. He could no longer tell that it was a rat, but he clearly saw something hunched over in the cage.

Yes. He smiled, pleased with his work.

He pondered his pleasure in it, meditating on the Fourth Maxim of Franci B'Yot, the behaviorist who had influenced P'Andro Whym's thinking. Examine every turn in the labyrinth of your mind, for your many thoughts are sacred in their truth, and the unexamined mind

will be consumed by its fears and desires.

Why is this work so satisfying to me? It did not take him long to see it. It pointed to a simpler time when he'd made simple things.

The days spent working to bring Isaak back from the dead had changed him. When he'd first petitioned the papal offices for permission to build the mechoservitors adapted from Rufello's Book of Specifications, he'd had no idea he would someday worry for an actual person he had created-a machine that had become human somehow, or something close to it-through the grief of genocide and the blood magick of Xhum Y'Zir's final spell.

The monoscope gave him such pleasure, he realized, because it was a problem he could solve. And because it distracted him from worrying about his metal child.

He'd seen little of Isaak in the past days. The metal man had spent his time locked away with the book by Tertius, and Charles suspected he was replaying the dream. The one time Charles had brought it up, Isaak had said nothing, though the shaking of his chassis, the pop of gears within and the sudden gout of steam betrayed the mechoservitor's discomfort.

Charles tried to turn his mind away from his concerns for Isaak, instead considering modifications that might make the monoscope less bulky and more conducive to scout warfare. He'd just lifted his pencil to make sketches when he heard Isaak's heavy but tentative knock on his door. He put down the pencil. "Come in."

Isaak came in and closed the door behind him. His bellows pumped, and steam shot from the exhaust grate set between his metal shoulders. "I've received a courier from Lord Rudolfo," the metal man said. "I wish to discuss it with you." Isaak looked to him and then looked away. "I wish to discuss the dream with you as well."

Charles nodded and gestured to the heavy stool near his worktable. "Sit with me, Isaak."

Charles sat, too, and waited for Isaak to speak. When he did, it seemed he spoke faster than normal, as if his words were crowding his narrow throat. "Lord Rudolfo has sent word by courier that an operation in the north requires two of the library's mechoservitors. They are required to have scripting or archived holdings in cartography and geology."

Curious, Charles thought. He felt his eyebrows raise. "I wonder what he's found there?"

Isaak's chassis trembled. "I do not know. He has asked me to decide which are best suited and send them north under scout protection in utmost secrecy."

Charles noted the lie Isaak's body betrayed with such subtlety. Perhaps it was a half lie. "Regardless, his specifications are clear. It

should be easy enough to identify the two best equipped."

"Yes," he said. "But there is more, Father." He paused, his eyes flashing brighter and then dimmer. "I am proceeding further in my comprehension of the dream. Tertius's volume was… clarifying."

Charles wanted to ask him about the dream but did not. Instead, he forced himself to wait.

Finally, Isaak spoke, and when he did, Charles heard determination and passion in the metal man's voice. "I must join my cousins in their work," the metal man said, bursting into tears that filled the room with the smell of wet copper. "I must leave Lord Rudolfo and the library in other hands and serve the light revealed within the dream."

Charles felt the weight of the words and reached over to place a hand upon Isaak's shoulder. He wanted to ask him why, but everything the arch-engineer needed to hear was in his metal son's voice. "You're going north, too," he said.

Isaak nodded. "The equation holds true: My work here will not save the light. My work with my cousins may."

Charles had heard less conviction in the voices of fresh acolytes, still red-faced with zeal. He blinked at it. "When will you leave?"

"Three days from now," he said, his eye shutters blinking tears from the ducts set just beneath his jeweled eyes. "I will not run with the others. I will ride with a caravan of fresh recruits."

Charles nodded. It was enough time to set the mechoservitors to their tasks. "And where will you go?"

Isaak's chassis did not shake this time, though Charles was prepared for it to do so. "I will follow my cousins into the Beneath Places and join them in their analysis of the Book of Dreaming Kings."

The Beneath Places. Charles felt his face pale. He'd heard stories, of course. The buried basements of the world-civilizations built by survivors over the top of yet more basements stretching back to the forgotten times, the time of the Younger Gods.

Charles looked at Isaak, already calculating how much time he would need to teach the mechoservitors how to reproduce the monoscopes based on his prototype. After that, he would need time to pack and time to be certain the mechoservitors here could maintain themselves as needed. He did not believe for a moment that he would be gone for long. He also did not believe Isaak would be gone long, either, despite the passion he heard in the metal man's voice.

Still, his metal son was leaving, and Charles needed to be ready to leave with him and stay with him until either Isaak's cracked heart broke or until this strange dream had worked itself out of him.

When Isaak stood and left, Brother Charles watched the door and wondered how a thing that he had made could now be a person he

loved. And how that person could compel him to action without answers to his questions, with questions left largely unasked.

He did not know. But he knew he was going and that once he had a plan in place, he would inform Isaak and House Steward Kember of his intentions.

Charles returned to his workbench, pushed aside his sketches and started plotting out the hours of his next three days. Jin Li Tam They pulled the heavy pine door closed behind them, forcing the winter wind back. Servants surged forward to take Jin Li Tam's, Winters's and Ria's heavy fur robes. They'd spent the morning in a leisurely breakfast and had then set out on foot to the new school, walking on paths plowed clean of snow by men with mules and sticks.

We are far north this winter, Jin Li Tam thought. At least fifty leagues farther than she'd been with the Wandering Army. She instinctively reached for Jakob's head again, touching his tiny ear. He rode snug and warm in his harness, sound asleep, though she was certain he would be hungry soon.

She wiped the snow from her boots onto the thick towels that had been placed there for them.

Ria did the same, smiling at Winters as she did. "I think you'll appreciate this," she said, "given your love of learning. Father's Androfrancine gave you a taste of what we're doing here." She said the word Androfrancine with an unmasked tone of disgust.

Jin Li Tam's eyes went to Winters's face just in time to see the look of surprise there. The girl glanced her direction, and the spark of anger that Jin saw gave her pause.

Ria walked down a carpeted hall to another door. Behind it, Jin heard a voice talking in a measured and gentle voice. Pausing, Ria smiled at her and then opened the door.

The classroom sat thirty children easily, lined up on plank tables and benches facing a teacher who sat at a small table at the head of the room. When they saw their queen, they stood.

"Good afternoon, children," Ria said. "I've brought you a most important guest."

Ria motioned for Jin Li Tam to enter, and she hesitated. Checking Jakob again, she stepped into the classroom.

As one, the teacher and the students bowed deeply. The teacher blushed. "Great Mother, I am honored to meet you. When I heard that you were bringing the Child of Promise to our school, I wept for joy."

Now Jin Li Tam found herself blushing. She couldn't find any words, and she was unable to meet the open adoration in the woman's eyes. She looked instead to Winters, who'd stepped into the room to stand beside her. The anger she'd seen was now tucked away, and Jin Li Tam noted the skill with which Winters concealed it.

Ria went to an empty section of table with three small chairs, motioning for them to sit. Once they had, the children sat, too. "I thought," the Machtvolk queen said to the children, "that we might sit with you and hear what you are learning."

The teacher beamed. "I was teaching them about the Great Promise."

Ria inclined her head. "Please continue."

The teacher returned the slight bow and walked to her table. Sitting down, she picked up the newly bound book. "Join me, children, in the fourth verse of the sixth chapter of the Last Gospel of Ahm Y'Zir."

Jin Li Tam remembered that title and glanced to Winters for confirmation. Yes. She knows it, too. It was the book Winters had brought to Rudolfo, the one that convinced him that they would be safe here. He'd translated passages for her, as had Winters, but she wondered how much it had lost through that process.

Now, she listened as the teacher selected a child to read the verse they were to discuss. The little girl stood, looked to Jin Li Tam, her face red, and then she recited from the book. "And at the end of days, a Crimson Empress shall rise from the south and a Child of Promise from the north to reunite a kinship long severed. And their reign shall heal this broken earth and restore the Machtvolk to their rightful home."

Jin Li Tam watched the room as the child read and saw that both the teacher and Ria closed their eyes for the recitation. When she finished, they opened them. "Excellent, Nandi," the teacher said. "So who can tell me what is the rightful home of the Machtvolk?"

A boy raised his hand. Jin Li Tam thought he couldn't be older than eight. When the teacher called upon him, he answered in a loud, clear voice. "Our rightful home is in service to House Y'Zir as hand servants to the Crimson Empress and her betrothed."

"Yes," she said. "Very good."

For the next thirty minutes, the teacher asked questions and various students raised their hands. As they asked and answered questions, she found herself caught up in the elaborate story of their gospel, and it disturbed her. On the one hand, she could see the comfort it would bring to know their station, to hope for a better, healed world and to be connected in some way to that healing through their service. But on the other hand, she saw that they were teaching these things to children. Certainly, adults would also believe it-surely the evangelists she and Rudolfo had spoken with believed with their whole hearts. But those adults would turn quicker to doubt than a child would. What they taught these children, now at such a young age, would stick to their hearts like the snow falling outside.

Wizard Kings worthy of worship, kin-healing and magick by the shedding of blood-it would follow them throughout their lives.

Your grandfather created this and fed it, she tried to tell herself. But the more she heard, the less she believed that possible. He'd not created it. He'd believed it. And he would not have without good reason.

This also disturbed her, and she found herself pulled into the Whymer Maze yet again.

At the end of the lesson, the teacher invited Jin Li Tam and Jakob to the front of the class. She presented them with a copy of the gospel they'd read from-bound in cured leather and translated into Landlish from the ancient language of House Y'Zir.

After they bundled into their robes, they trudged back through the snow to Ria's lodge, where they were met by a warm foyer and yet more servants to help with robes and boots. While the others moved off to the dining room, Jin Li Tam excused herself to feed Jakob. At home, she would have thought nothing of feeding him anywhere she happened to be. But here, with the way these people looked at her and her son, she craved privacy.

She slipped down the hall and opened her door, turning to close it and suddenly stopping when she was caught off guard by the slight breeze that followed her in. "I'll trust you to turn your back, scout," she said as she went to the bed and pulled Jakob from his harness.

"Apologies, Lady Tam," the Gypsy Scout said in a voice muffled with magick. "First Captain Aedric bid me bring word directly to you."

Jin Li Tam laid her son on the bed and shrugged out of the harness, setting it aside. Then, she checked his diaper and unbuttoned her shirt before raising him to her bared breast. She winced as he took the nipple, feeling the beginnings of his teeth. "What have you learned?"

"We spent today scouting unusual bird migration to the northwest and found something of note. A series of caves outfitted as a messaging station."

She heard hesitation in his voice, despite the magicks. "What else?"

"There is evidence of messages being intercepted and altered," the scout said. "And birds are being diverted here somehow."

She'd known that the birds had become unreliable. She remembered well the forged note she'd received in her sister's hand just before Jakob's healing, telling her there was no cure. Setting her up to turn to Ria's blood magick as her last and best hope.

She closed her eyes against the pull of Jakob's mouth. "Is there more?"

"More evidence of compulsory worship for those who are not

quick to convert. Forced cuttings. We think there may be a fledgling resistance movement at work, as well."

She nodded. "Very well. Tell Aedric to keep the scouts out and gathering intelligence where they can. I will figure out how to get word to Rudolfo."

"Aye, Lady."

She looked over her shoulder in the direction of his voice. "Now, stay put until I've finished and I'll let you out on my way to lunch."

She turned her attention back to her boy and found herself wondering how it was that he had become so important in this story that she was only now just beginning to grasp. It was an ancient story that stretched back beyond the Age of the Wizard Kings, if today's lesson was to be believed. And it was a story that her father's father had embraced to such a degree that he had arranged to sacrifice his first son and most of his family in order to heal kinship with House Y'Zir. He'd engineered within the Named Lands the beginnings of the fall of the Androfrancines and, through her father, both Rudolfo's reign and her own betrothal to him. He'd arranged for her, through her father, to bear Rudolfo an heir. And had also arranged the transfer of the library, the Order's holdings, and their own family's vast wealth into the Forester's hands.

She wondered if her grandfather bore the coming sacrifice of his family like a great mountain upon his back. Or did he find joy in it? Or both?

She wondered what it meant to believe in something so completely as to make such choices, to love something so wholly as to give everything for it.

Then Jin Li Tam looked to the face of her suckling son and understood what could bring her to that place.

Still, it did not comfort her to know it. Winters Outside, wind rattled the shutters and Winters felt sleep pulling at her even as she turned another page in the gospel she read.

She'd read the book innumerable times now, gleaning what she could from the cryptic passages and prophetic promises. She wasn't sure why she poured herself into it; it seemed the only thing she could do. Somehow, she thought, if she could just understand these new beliefs among her people, she might know how to free them from its hold.

No, she told herself, not new, but old. Some aspects older even than their sojourn in this land.

Still, how long had this resurgence lain in secret, gorging itself on her tribe beneath her and Hanric's oblivious eyes? At least back to the time of her father, she knew. And had he been aware of it? Had he, like Jin Li Tam's grandfather, been an active participant in this faith?

She could not believe that, but neither could she believe how wrong his dreams had been, how wrong her own dreams had been, in light of what now happened in their world. Some part of her still wept for the home she was so certain would rise, and for the boy now lost to her whom she'd so completely believed would take them there.

She stretched up a hand to check the knife hilts that peeked out from beneath her pillow. They seemed much more likely than dreams or boys when it came to taking back her land. She'd even found herself considering whether or not she could slip one of those blades between the ribs of her older sister and take back by force what she had lost by apathy. But the moment that violent thought intruded, her stomach clenched and recoiled at the thought of it.

What would Jin Li Tam think of that? she wondered. She knew the woman was capable of killing. They'd danced with the knives each morning, and surely the movements of body and blades could be taught. Already, she felt competent. But could that redheaded courtesan spy turned Gypsy Queen and mother teach Winters how to kill?

It is not who I am. But maybe, she thought, it is who I need to be.

She forced her mind back into the gospel. And in those days the birds of the sky shall betray and the darkness that masquerades as light shall be fully illuminated by the grace of House Y'Zir. The Usurper's city will become a pyre and the Machtvolk will rise from their ashes and mud to make straight a path for the Crimson Empress's advent. She thumbed the pages forward now, finding a less familiar passage. And behold, I saw those dwelling in the Beneath Places and heard these making their bargain with devils. Weeping, I watched them summon forth their abomination to damn and desolate the children of men by a song. And I wept not because of the sorrow of this, but because of the grace of the Crimson Empress, for even in this, she would prevail in joy, and heal our broken home.

She read it again, drawn in by the power of the words. She'd read as many books as she could get her hands on-Tertius had been particularly good at smuggling them in. She'd read most of P'Andro Whym's gospels, but his were not so dressed in imagery, parable and prophecy. They were mostly admonitions and stories around the preservation of human knowledge and learning from the mistakes of the past.

But these writings, unlike the reason-based words of the Androfrancines, were not so very different from her own Book of Dreaming Kings, and she knew that this similarity was at least a part of its appeal among those of her people who now believed it. It was specific enough to give something of substance to cling to, yet vague enough to allow for varied interpretations.

And unlike the Book of Dreaming Kings, this gospel was something every family could sit with near the fire, read on a winter's night and feel a part of.

Closing the book, she climbed out of her bed and put it on the shelf as far from her as the room allowed. She couldn't bear to keep it any closer. Then, she settled back into the bed, savoring its warmth in the cool room. She dimmed the lantern and gave herself to rehearsing the steps of tomorrow's knife dance. She'd moved through the dervish twice and started on a third, mentally noting each place she'd put her feet in the muddy snow, trying to block out the book.

When the dream fell upon her after so long away, it jarred her and she blinked at the suddenness of it. Sitting up in her Wicker Throne, she savored the sunlight that somehow found her and bathed her here in her subterranean throne room.

She felt a presence and spoke to it. "Neb?"

The only answer was the faint sound of clicking and clacking that drifted up to her from the tunnels behind her. Rising, she gripped the Firstfall axe tightly in her fists, wishing instead for scout knives, and made her way toward that sound.

Winters descended into the caves, passing her sleeping and bathing areas as she wound her way to the leagues-long cavern where she'd spent most of her life before leaving for the war two years earlier. As she drew closer, she heard the sound of a harp and for a moment recalled another dream from months before. She looked in the sitting area and was not surprised to see Tertius sitting there, his fingers moving over the strings and filling the room with music. The last time she'd seen him in this place, the Book of Dreaming Kings was burning as it was consumed by the light. This time, the dream was different.

Four robed figures stood facing the shelves of volumes that lined the walls, and she watched as metal hands moved quickly over the volumes, pulling down one here and one there. The clacking and clicking was louder, now, and punctuated by massive gouts of steam that burst from vents in their metal backs. And whatever books they pulled down did not get replaced, leaving gaps on the shelves, sockets empty of their teeth. She stepped toward them.

"Careful," Tertius warned her, picking up the tempo of his song upon the harp. "They will consume you, too, my queen."

She looked back to him but could not heed his warning. Instead, she stepped even closer and saw more clearly what they did.

Raising the volumes to their metal mouths, they bit into them with sharpened teeth and chewed the paper down, devouring the volumes as quickly as they could.

Her own voice startled her as she reached out a hand, laying it

upon a wool-clad shoulder that was warm to her touch. "No," she cried.

The metal man turned on her, quickly, a free hand suddenly flashing up to grab her wrist even as its eyes went bright yellow with alarm. "You do not belong here." It looked to its neighbor. "The tamp is not holding."

"We knew that it might not," the other said. "Their very blood conducts the dream."

"We may be seen," another ventured.

All around her, the song swelled to a crescendo, and she struggled to look back toward Tertius and his harp, only now she could not see him. The metal men crowded her, their mouths opening and closing, no longer seeking the dream on paper as they instead sought it from her flesh.

As those mouths descended upon her, she heard a great shriek and knew that it was she who made it. She felt the teeth grinding over her skin, felt the hungry hands grabbing to hold her still that they might bite into her. She tried to raise the Firstfall axe in her hands, tried to swing it at the metal men, and suddenly there was another presence with her in this room.

"Neb?" she asked again.

"Peace, Winteria," a voice whispered to her. "The dream tamp is merely failing. And as it is with dreams, this one is not as it appears."

The metal men continued to crowd her, and she fell down to her knees beneath the weight of them. Beyond them, she saw wet bare feet that stood in silver puddles near where Tertius had played. Now, though, the harpist and his song had suddenly vanished. She felt a sob shudder out of her. "Who are you? Why won't you help me?"

She wished she could see the man's face as he spoke, but already her eyes were closing involuntarily against the sudden pain she felt as their teeth rent and sundered her. "I cannot help," the man said. "I can only observe. But you can help yourself. Give yourself back to the dream, child."

I do not know how, she tried to say but couldn't.

As if hearing, he answered her. "Give yourself to it. Lay down your axe."

Taking a deep breath, she forced her hands to release the axe and gave herself over to their grabbing hands and biting teeth. She made herself breathe through it and felt the pain become a cool breeze scented with unfamiliar flowers and warm, salted air.

And suddenly, the hands and mouths were gone from her and she stood with a dozen mechoservitors-no, she realized, at least two dozen, maybe even an army of them-upon a massive white tower overlooking a blue-green ocean so clear that it hurt her eyes. Above

her, a brown moon filled the sky far larger than any moon could be, and she remembered it from her dreams.

This is our home, she remembered telling Neb where they lay naked and sweating in an open-air bed that showed them that great moon.

All around her, the song rang out and the mechoservitors danced in time to it, forming a great circle that turned around her.

"It requires a response," they sang in unison.

It was the sound of that great metal choir that jarred her from her sleep and caused her to sit bolt upright in her bed.

Weeping, Winters did what she'd done with every dream she'd ever remembered for as far back as she had memory. She went to her desk and, with shaking hand, lifted up her pen to write it down.

Chapter 13

Neb Neb's first awareness was a throbbing pain that licked at him, gradually building to a fierce, hot light that burned him as he forced his eyes open. A blue sky stared back at him, and he struggled to get out from under its brightness.

"He's awake," a woman's voice said just outside his vision. But when she leaned in, her face eclipsed that piercing sky and the shadow of it prevented him from seeing her. "Hello, Abomination." The booted foot surprised him when it struck his side; he felt the wind go out of him. "That is for our sister." The boot landed again, and this time he saw sparks of light behind his eyes and cried out from the pain. "And there are more to come."

He winced and licked his lips. "I don't-"

Another face eclipsed the sky, and now his eyes were adjusted enough to see the thirty-second daughter of Vlad Li Tam. Only now, her face was puffy and bruised, one eye nearly swollen shut. "And I haven't even begun with you, Abomination," she said, her voice low and full of rage. "I will repay you sevenfold for every injustice you dealt me." She leaned closer. "Every injustice," she said again.

"You'll have your time, sister," another voice said. "For now, be grateful that you were correct about the thorns. If you'd been wrong, you'd be bound for the Imperial Cutting Gardens."

When the thirty-second daughter spoke, her voice was assured. "I was never in doubt, sister. The scriptures are clear on this matter: And the thorn shall not sting him, nor the beasts of the beneath rend him, nor the ghosts in the water flee him, for the Abomination shall beguile them all.

Neb opened his mouth to speak, turning and twisting. Only now was awareness leaking into him. His arms were stretched out and his wrists burned from the ropes that bound him to what he assumed must be stakes driven into the hard-packed ground. Similar ropes bound his ankles, and he was suddenly aware of his nudity. He closed his mouth.

Their voices shifted suddenly to a language he did not understand, and their faces withdrew from his sight. He lay there, slowly taking inventory of his senses and his questions.

What could he remember? He'd been holding the tiny kin-raven token, and then he'd been startled. It had made contact with his skin and he'd suddenly found himself pulled away again, similar to the time before.

What had he seen? He'd heard his father's voice at some point, but the words seemed far away now. He'd seen Winters briefly,

undressing, and then there had been a white tower and-

It requires a response.

Isaak was there with him and they were surrounded by the song, so loud it lifted the hair on his arms and neck and moved through the air around them.

He felt the hot stab of shame. I've lost it; I've lost the dream. The silver crescent was now in the hands of these women, and though he did not know who they were or what they intended with him, he did know they were his enemies. And they were enemies of the dream as well.

Neb tested the rope gently with his left arm, then his right. He did the same with his feet. It was tight enough that he doubted he could slip free, but even if he could, what next? There were at least three-perhaps four-of these women, and each, he assumed, was armed in much the same way as the thirty-second daughter had been when he'd found her.

The thought of her twisted that hot knife in him. He'd trusted her and she had betrayed him, delivering him over to her so-called sisters. He had saved her life, and from everything he could glean from her so far, she'd seemed sincere in her need to reach the Ninefold Forest with her message. She'd readily accepted his help, and then, the moment he touched the kin-raven, she'd turned on him and put him down with his own rifle, summoning her sisters to their location.

Or so it seemed.

Their leader was back now, crouching beside his head and leaning in so he could now see her. She wore dark silk trousers and a matching shirt, unbuttoned near the top to reveal the gentle curve of her breasts as she bent over him. Her face was seasoned by midlife, her hair gray and cut so short that it bristled. And like the other girl, her face and arms were latticed with symbols cut into her skin. Her blue eyes were piercing and cold even in this desert.

"Who are you?" he managed to croak.

She chuckled. "I am one who saves us all from the Abomination and his dream." She held up a long silver knife. "And I'm nearly ready to begin that saving."

He looked at the blade; it wasn't a scout knife. It was more delicate, its edge crusted with salt, and he felt his stomach twist. "What do you want?"

She grinned. "First, I want you to know how serious I am. Then, I want you to tell me where you've hidden the artifact and show me where the mechoservitors are."

Hidden the artifact?

The thirty-second daughter appeared above and behind her, and he squinted through the sunlight to make out the expression on her

face. For just the slightest moment, he thought he saw fear there. Then, the mask was firmly in place again and she spoke. "I request the first cut, sister."

The woman with the knife cocked her head, considering Neb. "It is a reasonable request given the price you've paid to bring us to him." She held the knife up, and after the girl took it, she stepped back. "First blood is yours."

The girl moved in to crouch beside him, then leaned over him so that her face was near his. "You've brought this on yourself, Abomination." And as she said it, her hand pressed at his shoulder even as she turned her body so that it was between them and the other woman. It took him a moment to pick out the message in her fingers. Stupid, silly boy-you left me no choice.

It was the subverbal of the Gypsy Scouts, a language of touch and hand-signs he'd only barely begun to learn before leaving his training as an officer in Rudolfo's Ninefold Forest.

He tried to mask the recognition in his face, and even as he did, he felt the cold edge of the blade moving over his body, a slender fang looking for the right place to bite. Be strong, Nebios, the one hand told him.

Then, the other began its darker work, opening a cut that ran from his collarbone to his navel, and Neb tried with every bit of his resolve to not scream at the sudden, searing pain of it as he bucked against the ropes that held him.

He failed utterly. Rudolfo Rudolfo scanned the message again, his eyes finding each smudge, each slant to a letter or space between. After reading it for the second time, he cursed again, this time more loudly.

"When did this happen?" he asked, letting the anger show in his voice.

"Five nights past," the courier said.

Rudolfo could imagine it. Some kind of distraction to get his men to open the gate. And then a quick skirmish. Certainly his Gypsy Scouts had done their best, but they were no match for their blood-magicked opponents and the element of surprise.

I am infiltrated on my most protected border. The Keeper's Gate was the only access point to the Churning Wastes unless one was inclined to sail around the horn-something a few men like Rafe Merrique had been known to do. Rudolfo's men had guarded it since Petronus deeded the Androfrancine holdings to the Ninefold Forest before dissolving the Order. And truly, he'd not expected to be guarding it from that direction. They held the gate to keep the Churning Wastes closed to the rest of their neighbors.

But now, a small band of blood-magicked scouts ran his forests.

Why? And who are they? They couldn't be Machtvolk unless they'd somehow sailed the horn, which he found unlikely.

He'd read Petronus's notes and had talked with Vlad Li Tam about his father's slender volume that outlined a strategy for the fall of an order and the changing of an age. He'd read the new gospel of the Y'Zirite resurgency, written by Ahm Y'Zir, the seventh son of Xhum Y'Zir, and seen his own family somehow written into this story.

He thought back to his time on the island of the Blood Temple during the rescue of House Li Tam. The remnants of that family had seen unfamiliar vessels in the water there, and that took doing, given that Vlad Li Tam's family had been the premier ship-builders in the Named Lands before turning to banking. If they did not recognize them, then these vessels had not sailed the Emerald Sea of the Named Lands. They were foreign, and this pointed in a direction that piqued Rudolfo's curiosity and whispered third alarm along his spine.

For over two thousand years, they had lived in these lands and believed they were alone in the world but for a few scattered people in the Wastes.

But what if we were not alone?

He forced himself back to the courier scout who stood waiting for a reply. He looked to Philemus. "What do you think?"

"Double the guard upon the Wall and upon the manors, General," the second captain said.

Rudolfo nodded, feeling the weariness settling into him. The command tent was suddenly cold. "I concur," he said. "I will return to the Seventh Forest Manor and continue the investigation."

Philemus blinked. "There isn't much you can do in the investigation, General."

Something stirred in Rudolfo at the second captain's words, and it felt like anger. He's right, of course.

And more importantly, Rudolfo realized, Philemus was surprised.

Philemus was a savvy soldier turned scout. He'd held the same captaincy under Gregoric for a dozen years and had personally requested that Aedric be promoted to the position his father vacated. An older man, he'd still distinguished himself in the War for Windwir and wore his scarf of rank knotted to show his accomplishments in battle. But more importantly, he'd known the Gypsy King for most of Rudolfo's life.

"I'll have a squad ready to escort you," Philemus finally said. "And I will keep courier lines open between our new interests in the north and your office in the Seventh Forest Manor."

Rudolfo inclined his head. "Excellent, Captain. I think I will also-"

He heard running feet and an excited whistle outside the tent. They both turned toward the flap as it opened for the officer of the

watch. "We've found something… unusual, Captain Philemus."

The second captain scowled. "What is it?"

The man was breathless, and behind him, the light warbled in just a way for Rudolfo to see the vague form of a magicked scout. "Y'Zirite activity, Captain."

He'd not expected this, especially in this isolated region. There were a few scattered villages, but the nearest major town was his Eighth Forest Manor, at least a hundred leagues south. Rudolfo's eyes narrowed. "Evangelists? This far north and east?"

The officer of the watch shook his head. "Not evangelists, General."

Rudolfo met Philemus's eyes and knew his second captain also saw the grim expression upon the officer's face. Words were not going to suffice.

"Show us," Rudolfo said.

Ten minutes later, they ran magicked through the deep northern forest, tongues clicking against the roofs of their mouths to keep formation. Rudolfo kept Philemus on his right, just behind the young scout who'd brought word of this discovery. Around them, mist lay over the top of the ground, writhing with the breeze they made as they sprinted lightly over the surface of the frozen snow. Over them, the canopy of trees filtered the gray light.

Rudolfo stretched his legs into the magicks, finding it hard to keep his balance with just one hand free. He kept his lips pressed tight against the nausea and the headache that always beset him when he used the scout powders and ran with his head down and his eyes moving to the left and right.

Certainly, it was unseemly for someone of his position to magick himself, though his men had seen him do it before on a handful occasions-most occurring since Windwir's fall. Unlike his scouts, he'd not been raised on the powders. He'd used them only enough to learn how to function under their heady influence. His father and his first captain had understood that sometimes the interpretation of kin-clave must be a fluid thing.

They ran ten leagues, and despite the stamina and speed the magicks lent him, Rudolfo knew his body would feel the run later, after the powders had burned their way out of his body. These powders, drawn and mixed from the various ingredients found in the earth's roots and minerals, berries and herbs could render the user stronger, faster, quieter and nearly invisible. But the scouts who had breached his eastern border there at the Keeper's Gate used magicks enhanced by blood and superior to anything the earth could give. Of course, until Ria showed up under those magicks, Rudolfo had assumed that the Machtvolk advantage was tempered by the fact that

these magicks ultimately killed those who used them. They'd found the bodies of the Marsher scouts who'd carried out the attack on his Firstborn Feast. And he'd watched several of the Tam family lay down their lives by taking up the blood magicks to rescue their father, most notably the alchemist daughter, Rae Li Tam. But Ria had not been harmed by them, and now these other scouts-either Machtvolk sent despite his firm words to Ria about breaching his borders, or some new threat-used them as well.

A part of him wished he'd brought back a supply that his River Woman could've studied. He'd been in a room full of these magicks, there in the Blood Temple's armory, and had not thought about it.

It is a formidable advantage in this strange war of ours. A war, he reminded himself, where he could no longer be certain who was friend and who was foe.

Ahead, the clicking shifted to the softest of whistles, and Rudolfo slowed. They were leaving one patch of evergreen and crossing a white clearing. Already, enough snow had fallen to cover the tracks of the patrol who had found this place earlier in the day. If they were fortunate, enough would fall over the next few hours to cover this latest trail.

They walked now, picking their way to the edge of a copse of trees. These were a darker evergreen, growing closely together and choked with more underbrush than was common in these parts. The nearer they drew, the more unusual it seemed until he realized it was because of the type of underbrush. These were the thick, twisted and thorny bushes used to cultivate Whymer Mazes-not a native plant this far north. And it had been seeded in the midst of these darker trees, creating a natural boundary to discourage entrance to this particular wood.

"There is an access point just north," the scout said in a muffled voice that the breeze carried to Rudolfo's ears.

They skirted the line of trees and brush, finally stopping at a small and narrow gap. With more whistles and clicks, the squad of Gypsy Scouts fanned out to establish a perimeter, their breath on the air and the clouds of snow where their feet fell giving them away.

Rudolfo waited until he felt the others slip ahead of him. Then, he followed and saw that the narrow tunnel twisted and turned much like a Whymer Maze before depositing them into a clearing that would have never been expected based on how the copse looked from outside.

There in the center of the clearing stood a windowless building made of white stone and hedged with yet more thornbushes. A large dark door stood closed against the weather. He felt a chill deeper than the winter air and forced his feet to carry him forward.

Even before he reached out to the open the door, he knew what this place was, and it took him no time at all to count the years it would take to hide it so thoroughly here within his Ninefold Forest, or to judge by the stonework, how long this building had stood here.

It was at least as old as he was, if not older.

He pushed the door open and waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloomy single room it opened on. It was round, like the Blood Temple, and in the center lay a stained altar with its carved symbols and its catch-troughs for the blood spilled upon it. Rough wooden benches surrounded it, and Rudolfo slipped into the large room.

He noticed the absence of dust, the faintest smell of smoke and something sweet and cloying on the air.

"It's been used recently," he said in a voice that shook with an emotion he could not identify.

"Yes," the scout said. "Within the last two weeks, though they were very careful to cover their tracks. There is a Rufello chest behind the altar."

Rudolfo picked his way around the room and saw the box there. He'd studied the earlier resurgences enough to know what would be within it. Copies of their so-called gospels-perhaps even this newest by Ahm Y'Zir, the one that spoke of his family as a part of the Crimson Empress's coming salvation. And there would be a set of silver knives wrapped in black velvet. Meditation candles made from wax and fat and blood, certainly, and vestal robes for whichever of his people served as the priest for this secluded shrine.

Shaking, he sat down on a bench and regarded the altar. He felt Philemus's hand on his shoulder and forced himself to decipher the pressing fingers.

This, Philemus said with his hands, is much worse than we expected.

"Yes," Rudolfo said in a quiet voice.

Friends now become enemies who sought to bring down his household. An enemy posing as his friend to the northwest, breaching his borders at will and sending their river of tripe into his lands by way of their evangelists. Beyond all of that, a potential enemy abroad-possibly dressed up as this Crimson Empress-and now this.

Evidence of Y'Zirite activity indeed, he thought, but stretching back decades in his Ninefold Forest. He reached up a tentative hand, finding Philemus's shoulder. I want this site watched night and day. I want a list of every man, woman and child who visits this shrine, and I want to know where they are from. But even as he issued the orders, he knew that it was just one shrine. How many others could be hidden away from the more populated corners of the forest?

Philemus's response was not quick. There was hesitation in the

fingers when they finally moved again. Aye, General.

He dropped his hand back into his lap. Then slowly, he stood and turned his back upon the altar. He made his way out of the simple stone building and waited for the others to remove all traces of their passing in this place. Already, his mind spun strategy after strategy, trying to find some way-any way-to deal effectively with this latest discovery.

I am beset without and within, Rudolfo realized. And there may truly be no victory at the end of this. It bore all the markings of a carefully laid path, set into place possibly before he'd even been born. "Philemus?"

He felt the wind on his cheek. "Yes, Lord?"

"I will not be riding for the Seventh Forest Manor after all," Rudolfo said. "I will stay north with the army. But I want you ride south and personally command a careful but quiet search of the Ninefold Forest for more of these shrines. We need to know where they are and who is involved."

He felt the hand upon his shoulder again. You are asking me to use the scouts for intelligence gathering among our own people? With resources already stretched?

And they were stretched. He could only hope that Lysias's recruiting strategies would help. But that was not the larger concern in his second captain's mind. Using magicked scouts to follow his own people was a path no Gypsy King before him had taken. "I am not asking you," Rudolfo said in a measured voice. "I am ordering you to."

"Aye, General," Philemus said, and Rudolfo heard the discomfort in his voice.

As they set out for camp, Rudolfo slowed his pace and hung back. With each booted foot upon the snow, he tried to find some kind of hope he could cling to that his position was not as untenable as it appeared.

But deep in his heart, Rudolfo knew the truth. And whatever part of his father that still existed within him felt despair and shame at what he knew must certainly be coming. Petronus A hot wind rose from the east and pressed down upon them as they made their way across a sea of razor-edged glass intersected by a road just wide enough for two to ride abreast. Petronus rode with his head low, a straw hat held tightly in place with one hand. To his right, Grymlis leaned forward in his saddle. Behind them, their ragged company of scouts and Gray Guard stretched out across the desert.

There was salt on the air and the dead dust of cities. When he was younger, Petronus had had a certain romance about this place. He'd dug in the woods behind his parents' house as a boy, pretending he was an Androfrancine pulling fragments of the light out of the

desolation. That romanticism led eventually to belief in their dream and his decision to join the Order.

Now, though, he saw only stark reminders of humanity's capacity for apocalypse.

Petronus.

He looked around, suddenly aware of a tingling in his scalp and a tickling in his ears.

"Petronus?"

He looked up from his desk and the thick parchment reports that awaited his attention. "Yes?" He blinked, recognizing the man who sat across from him. "You're Hebda."

The man nodded, his face looking frantic despite the relative calm of the afternoon. "Listen to me," he said. "Neb has somehow overpowered the dream tamps."

"Dream tamps?" He'd heard these words, but what did they mean?

"Not just one," Hebda said, his voice rising. "All of them."

Petronus shook his head. Another waking dream. He'd just been in the Wastes. He still had the smell of dust and salt in his nose. "What does that mean?"

He looked somber. "It means we can't contain the dream. It means they can follow it to the mechoservitors." He leaned forward. "Listen."

Petronus listened, tilting his head. Far away, on the wind, he heard a harp. "I know that song."

"Yes," Hebda said. " 'A Canticle for the Fallen Moon,' in E minor, by the Last Weeping Czar Frederico." He pointed to a report on the desk, and Petronus looked down at it. "We strongly suspect that Frederico did not actually compose the piece. We believe he heard it and learned to play it."

Petronus tried to recall the details of that particular bit of Old World lore. These stories were ancient when the Churning Wastes were a densely populated continent under the watchful eye of the seven Wizard Kings and their father. He certainly remembered the myth of Frederico and Amal Y'Zir, how their tragic love brought about the Year of the Falling Moon. He looked to the report and scanned the first page. Something about an artifact found hidden away and the song it played, over and over again. He turned the page and scanned the next. "It somehow affected the mechoservitors at Sanctorum Lux?"

"Yes," Hebda said. "Neb, too. His exposure to the Cacophonic Deaths greatly enhanced his sensitivity to it. You are sensitive as well, because of your own exposure to blood magicks, though until now the tamps have kept you insulated."

Petronus thought about this. "But these tamps do not work with Neb?"

"They did at first." Hebda looked around the office, as if expecting

to see someone. Then, he lowered his voice. "Neb is special; he had latent sensitivity by nature of who he is and the explosion at Windwir. But he's found something out there. Something similar, I think, to what I'm using now to speak to you."

Special. Latent sensitivity by nature of who he is. Petronus took the words, examined them, filed them away. Instead, he forced himself to think of that massive black rock surrounded by an underground sea of quicksilver. Seen from above, at least in his imagination, it looked like a dark and staring eye.

Petronus looked up and met eyes with Hebda. "How many of you survived Windwir?"

Hebda looked around again. "It would be imprudent to discuss that under these circumstances."

Petronus leaned forward, placing both hands flat upon his desk. "What is the operating mission and authority of the Office for the Preservation of Light?"

"Our authority is Papal by Holy Unction. Our mission is secret."

"I am the Pope," Petronus said, his voice rising.

"No," Hebda answered. "You were the Pope." Then he stood. "This is fruitless, Petronus. We do not have any more time for this." He pointed to a map that suddenly, conveniently lay open, covering half the desk. "His last transmission point was here." He pointed to a point on the map, and Petronus quickly memorized the surrounding area. "If they capture him, they will use him to find the mechoservitors. He has great reach with whatever it is he's found. And if they find the mechoservitors, the light will be utterly lost to us."

Already, he could smell the salt and dust choking out the scent of lavender and paper. But he had to ask at least one more question. "Who are they?"

"They," Hebda said, "are the Blood Guard of the Crimson Empress. And they're now loosed in the Named Lands as well."

Petronus felt the sharp edge of the rock as he connected with it and watched the world blaze white for a moment. Slowly, it refocused and he saw that he was staring into the sky. It was one of those days when the moon was visible, and he saw it thinly veiled behind high, thin clouds. The horses around him stopped, including his own, and Grymlis dismounted.

"Another one?" the grizzled captain asked.

But Petronus said nothing. Instead, he wondered how he'd not heard it before. Because it was everywhere, he now realized. The song was all around him.

And, Petronus knew, it required a response.

Chapter 14

Vlad Li Tam Vlad Li Tam knocked lightly on the boiler room door and slipped inside, pulling it closed behind him as he did. The heat of the room washed over him, and he felt the sweat rising. He licked the salt from his lips and glanced around the room.

Baryk stood nearby, and beside him, Vlad's forty-eighth son, Ren, covered in grease and wet from sweat. On the far end of the room stood the sunstone vault-a massive steel compartment with Rufello locks to keep the ancient power source secure. Though he wasn't supposed to have them, Vlad had long ago paid very well to acquire the ciphers for the locks, but he'd yet to need them. The boiler stood in the center, a series of pipes leading to and from it carrying steam aft to power the engines. Stretched out on a rack, almost as if hung to dry, the metal man stood, chest plate open, wires spilling out. Ren held one end of a braid of wires that led deep into the chest cavity.

He looked to him. "Are you ready, Father?

Vlad nodded. "Do you think it will work?"

"I think so," the young man said. "Yes."

They'd spent the better part of a day looking over the metal man before Ren Li Tam had been brought over from one of the other ships. He'd studied the mechanicals during a dispensational apprenticeship to the library in his youth and had continued to dabble here and there with what little he could find.

It took him no time at all to see that the mechoservitor's power supply had somehow burned out.

Now, most of a week later, they were ready to reactivate the mechanical using the sunstone that powered the flagship of the iron fleet. Ren had gone over his plan with them quite carefully, and Vlad didn't see a better way to discover how a mechanical could be adrift in the deepest south of the Ghosting Crests in one of Rafe Merrique's lifeboats.

"I'm going to power us down," Ren said, throwing a large switch. "Then I will wire the mechoservitor directly to the sunstone."

The vibration of the ship that he'd grown so used to was suddenly gone, and Vlad looked up. He could hear everyone breathing in the quiet.

He watched as Ren threaded his end of the wire braid through what looked like the eye of a gigantic needle set into the side of the vault. He knotted the braids and then pushed the needle into a slot in the side of the vault, slowly. When he was finished, he wiped the sweat from his hands and threw the switch.

The mechoservitor danced upon the rack for a moment, then

settled as its boiler started ticking. After a few minutes, the amber eyes fluttered open as the shutters blinked.

"Are you functional?" Ren asked it.

"I am functional," it answered.

"What is your designation?"

"I am Mechoservitor Number Seven, First Generation, attached to the Office for the Preservation of the Light by Holy Unction of Pope Introspect." The metal man shook violently as he spoke, his bellows pumping wildly as his eye shutters opened and closed fast as hummingbird wings. Then, the shaking stopped and the eyes grew bright and then dim. "My name is Obadiah."

Vlad blinked. "You have a name?" He was familiar with Isaak- though the last time he'd seen that metal man had been at Sethbert's arranged execution well over a year before. Still, Isaak was the only mechoservitor he knew of to take a name.

"I do," the mechoservitor said. "Where am I?"

"You are aboard The Serendipitous Wind, flagship of House Li Tam," Vlad said. "What are you doing so far to sea? And how do you come to be in one of the Kinshark's lifeboats?"

The metal man pulled at the chains that bound him to the rack. "Why am I restrained?" He stretched his legs.

Vlad smiled. "I ordered it. To be certain of you. When I am, I will order it otherwise."

The mechoservitor blinked. "You are the captain of this vessel?"

"I am Vlad Li Tam."

The mechoservitor clicked and clacked, its eyes flashing again. "Do you serve the light, Lord Tam?"

An odd question. And one he'd not thought about for a good while. Not so long ago, he might have lied in his answer. But now, he opted for the truth. "I do not serve anything," Vlad Li Tam said.

"The light requires service of you."

How many times had he heard these words? To be fair, at least half the times that he had acquiesced when they called, it had been because of some secondary outcome he could achieve beneath their very cowl-shadowed noses. His eyes narrowed. "What service does the light require, Obadiah?"

"A replacement power source. The twelve vessels provided you by the Androfrancine Order are powered by sunstones and-"

"Six vessels now," Vlad said. "Perhaps we can barter a satisfactory arrangement." He glanced around the room, saw the stool someone had placed for him, and sat in it. "But first, a conversation."

"Time is of the essence, Lord Tam. I do not-"

He raised his hand. "First," he said again, "a conversation." He leaned forward. "Where is the Kinshark?"

How long had that vessel been missing now? Two months? Four? He made a mental note to ask Baryk.

"I do not know," the mechoservitor said.

"Were you aboard her?"

The eye shutters flashed again.

Vlad smiled. "We found you in her lifeboat."

"I was aboard. I do not know her current location."

He nodded slowly. "What were you doing aboard the Kinshark?"

Nothing.

Vlad changed his tack. "Did you hire Rafe Merrique to transport you?"

The mechoservitor's bellows pumped, and a gout of steam released from the exhaust grate in its back. "The light required service of his vessel. Captain Merrique and his crew were provided for." When it met Vlad's gaze he felt suddenly unsettled by the intense light in those amber eyes. "May we now barter?"

Vlad shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "Not until my curiosity is satisfied. What is your purpose in the Ghosting Crests?"

"You are not authorized to-"

Vlad sighed. "Power him off."

The eyes flashed again, and the metal man began to shake. Ren reached for the switch, and the metal man's mouth worked its way open and then closed three times before it spoke in a quiet voice. "The antiphon will fail if you do not aid me, Lord Tam. My task cannot be accomplished without your assistance."

"Then trust me. There is no Order to support you. There is no Pope to offer Holy Unction. You are aware of this?"

"Yes."

"And you are self-aware. You have a name. Obadiah, yes?"

"Yes."

"You are capable of making choices outside of your scripting, Obadiah?"

The mechoservitor was silent for a moment. Finally, it spoke. "I am."

"Then choose to trust me."

It hung its head, and when it looked up, there were tears welling in its eyes. "But the dream is clear on this matter: You are not to be trusted."

Vlad sat back and blinked. "Me?"

"Your kind."

He glanced around the room and made a quick decision. "Everyone out," he said. "I want to be alone with it."

He watched the surprise register on the faces. As they slowly shuffled toward the door, he caught the sleeve of Ren's shirt. "Stay

nearby. I'll summon you."

He waited in silence for a minute after they left. Then, he edged his stool closer to the mechoservitor. "Trust is an earned commodity not easily accrued in these times," he said. "So I am going to trust you, Obadiah, and hope that you, in turn, will trust me." He waited until the mechanical stopped clacking, processing his words, and then continued. "The only reason I found you was because the d'jin we follow took us to you. If she hadn't, you would be lost at sea, nonfunctional, and whatever this antiphon is that you speak of would surely have failed. Do you concur?"

"I concur."

"You are adept at mathematics and probabilities. What are the chances of another sunstone-powered vessel finding you in the Ghosting Crests?" When the mechanical started clicking and clacking to work the equation, Vlad raised a hand. "I do not need the exact number. Would you concur that it is highly improbable?"

"Yes," Obadiah said. "I concur."

Even as he painted the image for the metal man, Vlad began to see it for himself. She had known. She had brought him to the metal man's rescue, but it did not appear to be her only destination. Each night, even since they'd brought the metal man aboard, she'd appeared to guide them farther southeast. Something still waited for them out in the waters where none dared sail.

"I do not know why she brought me to you," Vlad said, "but I believe she intended us to find you. Even still, she leads us southeast and-"

The mechoservitor looked up. "You sail for the Moon Wizard's Ladder." He started to tremble again. "The light-bearer is calling you into the dream."

Light-bearer? Vlad had never heard the term before. But he'd heard of the Moon Wizard's Ladder from the mythology of the Old World. He'd certainly heard stories as a boy about the Year of the Falling Moon and the ladder that the first Wizard King had used to return and avenge the kidnap of his daughters, establishing the firm but just reign by blood magick in the now desolate lands north of them. He thought of the ghost in the water, and his heart swelled for her, aching in its intensity, in his need to follow her.

Vlad forced his attention back to the mechoservitor. "Calling me into what dream?"

"The dream we serve to save the light," Obadiah said, his voice reedy and low. He clicked and whirred for a minute, as if calculating how much trust to extend. "The dream compels us. It requires a response."

Yes. Like the ghost in the water. Compulsion to follow, expressed

by an intense love. "The antiphon," Vlad said.

Slowly, the mechoservitor nodded.

Then it opened its mouth and sang. The metal voice rose in the metal room, and Vlad Li Tam felt the hair on his arms and neck lift. In that moment, he felt a connection to something he had never felt before. The song was all around him, wrapping him like the warm sea, his scars burning from the salt. Light pulsed and undulated, tendrils waving to him.

"I know this song. She sings it to me."

The mechoservitor stopped singing abruptly and fixed his eyes on him. "Lord Tam, you have heard the dream. You are my brother. The light-bearer chose you. The antiphon is nearly complete. We must clear the Moon Wizard's Ladder or the antiphon will fail and the light will be lost."

Vlad Li Tam stood slowly.

Yes my love, he told his ghost.

"Yes," Vlad Li Tam said to his metal brother, his cheeks wet from tears he did not know he cried.

He could still hear the song beneath his skin. Winters Winters moved through the new-fallen snow, her feet carrying her once more along a familiar pathway. Behind her, her two constant companions followed at an appropriate distance.

She'd dreamed for three nights straight now, and it startled her how much the dream had changed. Now, metal men and numbers and white towers overlooking placid oceans filled her. And those skies, that world that hung above them, were the ones she'd seen in the Homeseeker's dream. She knew they were connected just as she knew the song was what made it different now.

And then there was Neb.

She blinked, her eyes suddenly full of water. She could not see him, but she could hear him screaming somewhere far away. Or at least she thought it was him. Still, she'd written those parts down, too, even the words he cried out with such agony, though they were in a language she did not know.

From those nights, she'd amassed quite a stack of parchments. She carried them now in her copy of the Y'Zirite gospel, carefully folded in between the pages.

She climbed the slight incline and paused at the top, looking across to the closed entrance to her throne room. Garyt stood by it. When she was certain it was him, she continued walking.

Her hands moved quickly even as she hoped the fading sunlight was enough for him to see it. I am dreaming again, she signed. I must add the new pages to the Book.

He inclined his head slightly. I will find a way to add them for

you, my queen.

She returned his nod and followed the trail down to the river clearing. When she reached it, she saw Jin Li Tam waiting. She stood straight, staring out over the river, hands on the handles of her knives. Her hair was pulled back and tied with a leather cord, and for a moment, Winters thought she was looking at a girl, not the ruthless, formidable forty-second daughter of Vlad Li Tam.

Winters approached. "I'm here," she said.

Jin Li Tam looked at her. She nodded to her hands. "Why did you bring that?"

She looked down, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks and ears. She still held the Gospel of Ahm Y'Zir. I need to say something, she thought. She looked around, then leaned closer and lowered her voice. "I am dreaming again."

Twice now she'd said it, and it frightened her both times. After so long without the dreams, she'd finally accepted that it must be some strange anomaly. They'd been her constant companion for as long as she could remember, and then the dreams were gone. As if a door had been slammed shut.

And now, suddenly it was flung open.

Jin's eyebrows arched. "The ones you dreamed with Neb?"

She nodded and shivered. He'd screamed so loudly. "Yes, but different now. There are mechoservitors in my dream now." She paused, feeling that sudden rush of water again to her eyes. "And I think someone is hurting Neb, but I can't be sure." She continued at Jin's concerned look. "I think I hear him screaming."

Jin looked over her shoulder, keeping her voice low. "We should dance now. We're being watched."

Winters started to turn, realized she was doing it, and stopped. She looked around the clearing, found a stump and brushed the snow from it. Then, she put down the book and shrugged out of her fur coat.

Jin's knives were already out when Winters turned to face her. Drawing her own, she moved into the first overture. They moved slowly at first, their knives finding the others and clinking in the quiet afternoon. Their feet moved across the snow, breaking it up, as Winters matched her rhythm to Jin's. Gradually, the seasoned knife fighter raised the tempo until it was at a point where Winters had to work. At its crescendo, their knives sparked and rasped as they danced across the clearing.

After forty minutes, they stopped and Winters bent at the knees to suck in great lungfuls of the cold air. She looked up as she did it and saw that this time, even Jin Li Tam had broken a sweat. The redheaded queen smiled at her.

"You're getting better, girl."

She slowed her breathing. "Really?"

Jin nodded. "I'd pit you against any of Rudolfo's scouts. And your reach is exceptional. Better than most men. Once you've hit your full height, you'll be unstoppable."

Winters felt herself blushing. "Thank you." She managed an awkward curtsy. "I have an excellent teacher."

Jin Li Tam inclined her head, lifting her coat from the rock where she'd put it. "Tomorrow, then?"

Winters nodded.

She watched as Jin Li Tam and her escorts left. Her own guards still stood out of view in the woods, but she had no doubt they'd seen every step she'd taken in the dance, every thrust and slice of the blades. She went to the stump to get her coat and book.

She pulled the heavy furs over her and lifted the gospel. Something seemed different, and she glanced down at it. Opening it, she thumbed through the pages and heard her breath catch.

The dreams, folded so carefully into the pages, were gone.

She kept her back to her watchers, looking quickly around the clearing to see if somehow the pages had defied all logic and loosed themselves. Then, she looked to the snow around the stump. Only her footprints back and forth to it, though that meant little. A well-trained scout could run at top speed in the footprints of another, leaving little to no trace of their passing.

They're gone. But another page had been left-a note scribbled with a birder's needle on a bit of rough parchment. She read it without removing it from its place in the book: Hail Winteria bat Mardic, queen of the Marshfolk, and hail the Homeseeker's Dream. Someone will come to you each day in this manner. Your dreams will be added to the Book.

She closed the gospel and made her way back up the trail. As the forest swallowed her, she found herself pondering the dreams. Isaak had been there, and she thought that maybe he had even quoted the Book to her, though she didn't know how that could be possible. None but the Marsh King had ever read the Book. And Tertius, of course. It had been the price he'd extracted to abandon the Great Library at Windwir and risk a hangman's noose to educate the Marsh King's daughter.

She thought of the Book and the years spent in the smell of paper, in the guttering light of candles. Mornings spent writing and afternoons spent reading, connecting the various bits that connected. Nights spent seeing the shape of things to come; a home rising for her people.

I am dreaming again.

When she passed Garyt ben Urlin at his post, she watched him stand a bit straighter and she carefully inclined her head to him, mindful of the men who followed her.

Thank you, her hands said upon the side of her coat.

He said nothing, his own hands still upon his spear. But the look in his eye was enough for her. It was something she did not see in the eyes of those around her, something she herself had not felt often in the last year or so.

Still, Garyt had it in his eyes and in the line of his jaw, the way that he stood at the door he guarded.

Hope, Winters thought, is a contagious thing.

And in that moment, she knew what she must do. Jin Li Tam Late-morning sun slanted into the windows lining the hall, and Jin Li Tam embraced the warmth and light upon her face. It had already been a full morning.

She'd breakfasted with Winters, practicing the Gypsy subverbal language and discussing the girl's latest dream in quiet voices. After, she'd met with Aedric briefly while walking Jakob in Ria's meditation grove. He'd lost two scouts in the caves where the birds were being diverted and had pulled his men back. But still, the bird station had been disrupted. They'd launched a handful of short-distance birds to bear word of that back to the edge of the Prairie Sea. Still, unless Aedric committed resources to actually eliminate the bird station, it would be up and running again. And though Jin Li Tam was certain Ria knew Rudolfo's Gypsy Scouts were running these operations and tolerated them in an effort to prove her trustworthiness, she was equally certain that she would not tolerate an act of open aggression, Great Mother or not.

Thinking of Ria refocused her. The Machtvolk queen's note had been brief and direct, and Jin Li Tam wondered what was planned for her this afternoon. Another school? Not likely-she'd been asked to come alone. And the children at the school were far more interested in Jakob, their Child of Promise. She was merely the means to that end.

An odd place to be.

The doors to Ria's study were unguarded, and when she knocked, she found the door was ajar. "Come in, Great Mother," Ria said, rising from behind her desk. Her face was grim, and there were circles under her eyes.

Jin Li Tam forced concern into her voice. "Are you well, Queen Winteria?"

Ria offered a brief smile. "I am very well and very tired," she said. "And I've someone to introduce you to."

They found their boots and coats waiting for them at the door, and Jin Li Tam followed Ria as they climbed the low hill behind her

lodge. They walked without talking and Jin Li Tam savored it, enjoying the sound of the snow and ice crunching beneath their feet, the whisper of the wind through the trees. The air hung heavy with scents of pine and wood smoke and snow, and for a moment she was able to forget about everything but now.

At the top of the hill, a round stone building awaited. She recognized it as a blood shrine, but the guards at the door told her it wasn't the same as the others she'd seen springing up in the Marshlands.

When they approached, the guards quickly opened the door, and an old man in the long black robes of a priest met them. His sleeves were pushed up past his elbows, and his hands and forearms were covered in blood. He grinned behind a pair of thick spectacles. "My Lady," he said, "our penitent has taken the mark."

Ria smiled, and Jin saw genuine joy in it. "Good," she said. "Brother Aric, this is the Great Mother, Lady Jin Li Tam."

The priest bent from the waist. "Great Mother," he said, "I am honored to live so long as to see your coming."

Something in his voice chilled her. Or was it the way he looked at her? She inclined her head to show respect. "Thank you," she said.

He straightened himself. "I will hope to meet the Child of Promise before you return to the Ninefold Forest," he said. "Though I hope this will not be your last visit to our lands."

She smiled. "I'm sure it won't be."

The priest led them through another door, and Jin found herself wanting to retch from the smell of excrement, urine and blood that ambushed her. "I apologize for the smell," he said. "We had hoped to clean up before you arrived, but we only just now finished."

Jin Li Tam looked into the dim-lit room, suppressing the strong impulse to gasp at what she saw. She'd certainly seen violence-she'd given as much as she'd received. It had never felt right, but she'd learned from her father that feelings were simply the body's way of assuring its survival and should be subject to the rule of the higher mind. She'd assumed all violence should feel wrong. But there was a wrongness to what she saw now that turned her stomach over and broke her heart.

He'd been a man once, she knew, strapped to an altar designed to serve also as a cutting table. Now, he was a red mass of twitching, raw meat. His skin, freshly cut in the symbols of House Y'Zir, had been peeled away bit by bit. Sluggish streams of blood crept toward the catchers. The man wept quietly.

Ria approached, leaned in and whispered to him. "I am back, Jarvis."

A red mouth opened, flashing bloody teeth. "Oh my queen," the

man said.

"I've brought Lady Jin Li Tam, the woman you tried to murder." She looked to Jin. "We took Jarvis off the Delta. One of our priests in Turam hosted him for a few weeks and prepared him for us. He arrived yesterday and has been most forthcoming."

The man rolled his eyes, blinking more tears and sniffling. "I am mortified by my sin, Lady Tam," he said.

Ria continued. "Jarvis is a former Androfrancine engineer and was one of Esarov's lieutenants in the civil war. He was hired to create an explosive that could be magicked, and to train a team of former Delta Scouts to detonate it."

Jin Li Tam looked at him and tried find rage for him. She could not, and it bothered her. Instead, she felt curiosity and the question slipped out. "Why?"

"Yes," Ria said. "Tell her why."

He sobbed. "I was paid to do it. I did not realize who you were, Great Mother."

Jin Li Tam forced herself to meet his eyes. "Who paid you?"

"I did not meet him. It was arranged through Governor Rothmir's offices."

Rothmir. She recognized the name and suspected it was someone she'd met during her years as Sethbert's consort, doing her father's work. She looked at Ria. "Was Erlund involved in this?"

She shook her head. "We do not think so. A landed nobleman on the Emerald Coast." She smiled. "He's been sent for."

"I am mortified by my sin," the man said again.

She looked at him and tried again to find anger but could not. How is it that I pity this man? He had tried to kill Jakob.

Ria examined the knives that were laid out upon a black velvet cloth. She lifted one and held it up to the light. "We've learned all we can learn from Jarvis, and he's ready to pay for his sin." She extended the knife to Jin. "I wanted you to have this opportunity," she said.

Jin Li Tam blinked. "You want me to kill him?"

Ria nodded. "Of course. He participated in a plot to murder your family." She bent over him, stroking his bloody cheek. "You're ready, yes, Jarvis?"

"I am ready, my queen."

Again, Ria extended the blade, and Jin Li Tam understood the intersection she now faced. The choice she made here had significance beyond her feelings, and she willed herself to be, just for this moment, her father's daughter. This was a test, an opportunity to build trust.

Do not think. Do what must be done. Jin hesitated, then took the knife. She turned and bent over him. "You should not have tried to harm my family," she said in a low voice.

Then she did what needed doing.

When she was finished, she washed his blood from her hands in a silver basin they brought to her. She did so with her back turned and swallowed at the tears that threatened her.

Putting her coat back on, she followed Ria back to the lodge in silence, and when she took Jakob from Lynnae's arms, she crushed him to herself and stifled her sob in his blankets.

We are all mortified by our sins from time to time, she thought.

Chapter 15

Rudolfo Rudolfo paced the command tent and tried to force his anger into something he could manage. Outside, a break in the snow gave shivering recruits time to establish their somewhat more permanent quarters with timber felled by a group of loggers arrived out of Paramo, seat of the Third Forest Manor. It wasn't optimal work for the front end of winter, but Lysias had maintained that war did not wait for weather and neither should an army in training. So now, the sounds of saws and hammers filled the morning air.

And now, the last major wagonload of supplies from the Seventh Forest Manor was arriving. Future supplies would trickle in much more slowly now, though already crews of recruits were dispatched to drag heavy plows over the wagon trails to try to keep them clear.

Rudolfo stopped his pacing and forced himself to breathe.

It had been bad enough sending his wife and child into Ria's lands. Now he had word from Charles that he and Isaak made their way north with that last wagon train to follow the mechoservitors into the ground, and the thought that the most lethal weapon in the known world might stroll casually into Ria's hands raised a panic in him that his mind could only translate into rage.

I cannot let him leave. Isaak carried Y'Zir's Seven Cacophonic Deaths in his memory scrolls-a weapon that could leave the Named Lands desolate if the wrong hands were to lay hold of that spell. For Isaak to so suddenly and without a word make this decision and abandon his work in the library was an ambush Rudolfo had not expected, and everything within him whistled third alarm to this new development. And yet, how could Rudolfo stop his friend?

By forbidding it, he thought.

He heard footsteps approaching and listened for the low whistle at his tent flap. When it came, he returned it and a breathless lieutenant entered. "The caravan is here, General."

Rudolfo nodded. "Very well. Send Charles in first once they've been assigned quarters."

He forced himself to sit at his cluttered table, forced himself to sip at the lukewarm firespice that he'd barely touched, feeling the heat of it as it traced its way down his throat and into his stomach. He'd found himself spending more time with the stronger liquor of late, less interested in the fruit wines that had been his preference for so long before. He told himself it was the cold, but he knew it wasn't. It was the dulling of an edge that had become too sharp for him, and an easy way to find sleep at the end of a long day spent worrying.

He reread Jin's coded message about the bird station and what

they had gathered so far about the conspiracy on the Delta. He'd conferred with Lysias about the man Jarvis, and saw with little surprise that there was no love lost between them.

"He was ever of questionable character," Lysias had told him. "Choosing his loyalties based on the size of one's letter of credit."

It was a solid lead in the investigation, but he found himself wondering how deep and wide the conspiracy went and whether or not that weed could be dug out. Of course, his own garden was choked as well. They'd not found more shrines, and though his scouts carefully watched the one nearby, there had been no further activity there since his visit. His borders were breached to the west by evangelists, to the east by magicked runners he still couldn't find and to the south by this latest development.

He moved papers about for the better part of an hour, his eyes burning from lack of sleep and the words all blurring together into one that he finally spoke aloud. "Why?"

Just as he asked it, the lieutenant was back with Charles. Rudolfo looked at the man and saw his own weariness reflected back in the arch-engineer's face and eyes. He gestured to a chair. "Please sit," he said.

"Thank you, Lord Rudolfo." Charles sat, and the officer who escorted him slipped back out of the tent.

Even his voice sounds tired. Rudolfo pointed to the bottle of firespice. "It's been a cold ride north, I'm sure," he said. "Would you like a drink?"

Charles surprised him by accepting, and Rudolfo poured a small metal cup half full of the thick, spice-scented liquor. The old man raised his and Rudolfo followed.

"To brighter times," the old man offered.

"To brighter times," Rudolfo repeated.

They sipped, and the Gypsy King forced himself to wait quietly. Finally, he could wait no longer. "What in the Hidden Hells is happening, Charles?"

Charles blinked, and Rudolfo registered the surprise on his face at the sudden and uncharacteristic outburst. "You mean with Isaak?"

"Yes," Rudolfo said. "With Isaak."

Charles sighed. "I am not certain."

Rudolfo leaned forward, feeling the small table bend beneath his weight. "You made him. Surely you have some speculation? He's left the library in the care of the others and intends what exactly? And why?"

Charles paled, and Rudolfo was pleased that his tone induced such a response. "He intends to follow the other mechoservitors into the Machtvolk Territories. He is deciphering their dream along with

notes hidden in Tertius's volume on the Marshfolk prophecies."

The dream. He'd heard reference to it that night in the forest when the four mechoservitors had approached seeking safe passage. He'd heard other references as well. That it was coded into a song-one he actually sang to his infant son, one his own mother had sung to him and his brother when they were very young. "How did he come by this dream?"

He knew the answer already but wanted to hear it from Charles directly. The man made no excuse and no attempt to cover the truth. "I installed it in him after the explosion at the library."

Rudolfo's eyes narrowed. "Why would you do this without discussion with me?"

Charles raised his eyebrows. "I was not aware that discussion was required, Lord."

"He is the most dangerous weapon in the world," Rudolfo said in a low voice that betrayed his anger. And he is my friend, he didn't say. "I have strong interest in his safety."

"As do I," Charles answered.

Rudolfo continued, feeling the interruption in the tingling of his scalp. "Anything that might alter his normal functions is of concern to me. I should have been consulted on this decision. Ultimately, I am responsible for him as the inheritor of the Order's holdings and the Guardian of Windwir."

Charles inclined his head. "I would argue that ultimately I am responsible for him as the one who made him. But arguing this point would be fruitless. I failed to consult you; I intended no disrespect by this."

Rudolfo did not expect his fist to come up and then down upon the table. When it did, they were both surprised at the resounding noise of it. "Damnation," he shouted. "This is not about respect. He carries the Seven Cacophonic Deaths of Xhum Y'Zir within him, and now this dream that has worked its way into your mechanicals at Sanctorum Lux has worked its way into him." He felt the anger in his scalp again and forced himself to breathe in and out before continuing. "The others exhibited strange behavior as a result of this dream. Now he is, too. That library has been his home for nearly two years, and the work there has been his very soul."

"People," Charles said slowly, "often change direction."

Rudolfo opened his mouth to say Isaak was a machine, that he wasn't a person, but even as he started to speak, he knew it wasn't true. He'd seen Isaak as a person from the very first day he met the sobbing metal man. He'd dressed him in robes. He'd given him a name. He'd welcomed him into his family.

He is my friend.

He remembered the anxious days waiting for Charles to finally declare him functional again. He recalled vividly the sense of overwhelming relief when he'd learned the metal man had somehow absorbed the worst of the bomb blast, shielding his wife and son from an explosion that would have surely killed and buried them without the metal man's intervention.

Rudolfo sighed and forced himself to make eye contact with the old man. In those brown eyes, he saw the same two things that hid behind his anger: fear and love.

Charles stared back and let the silence hang heavy for a full minute before speaking. "I apologize for not discussing this with you, Lord Rudolfo. He asked for this dream, and under the circumstances, I felt it was my duty to grant his request and protect his privacy. I do not know what this dream is up to, but my surest path to discovery is to monitor him-and the others-and learn what I can."

Rudolfo studied the man, trying to keep hold of his anger, but already he felt it leaking away from him. He sighed, and it was loud in the tent. "You intend to go with him, then?"

Charles nodded. "I do," he said. "Though I hope we will be back soon. I'm too old to be chasing after metal dreams."

Rudolfo sighed again. "Very well." He looked up and whistled. The scout guarding his tent poked his head in. "Send Isaak in."

When the metal man walked in, Rudolfo noticed the change in him immediately. He carried himself differently, and when he spoke, his voice was also different-more sure and less accommodating. "Lord Rudolfo," he said as he inclined his metal head.

It is confidence. Rudolfo returned the slight nod. "Isaak."

"I fear," his metal friend said, "that I must take my leave of you. I am grateful for your hospitality and have been honored to serve you and your family."

Rudolfo thought there would be more conversation. That perhaps they would discuss this dream and what it meant and where exactly he went and how exactly he would help his cousins in their response to it. He thought they'd talk and find some kind of compromise. But in the end, he simply looked into Isaak's amber eyes. "You know what you guard, Isaak," Rudolfo said. "Do what you will-but guard yourself well, my friend."

He thought that Isaak would hang his head or that he'd see some spark of grief in the guttering light of those jeweled eyes. But Isaak returned his gaze levelly. "I will always be vigilant, Lord Rudolfo."

Rudolfo nodded. "Very well, then," he said.

He offered no word of dismissal. He simply went back to the papers on his desk until the two left his tent. After they had gone, Rudolfo sighed again and called for the captain of the watch.

"Magick a half-squad," he told the officer. "Follow them. Quietly."

And only after he was alone again, Rudolfo held his head in his hands and wondered at how quickly such fierce anger could burn itself into sorrow and despair. Neb Neb swam in pain and tried to find some part of himself that he could cling to as the fire laced his body and his mind lurched from scene to scene.

"Where are they, Abomination?" the woman asked as she traced another cut into his skin with her salted knife. She leaned over him, touching her own small, dark carving to his bloody skin.

He was in a room now, and he recognized it as the one he'd seen Winters undressing in. Now, he stood behind her as she wrote at a small desk, her hand moving across the pages. The knife moved over his skin, and she spun away.

Neb screamed.

A new face swam into his view-one he'd not seen for some time, and it reminded him of the words his dead father had told him what seemed so long ago, before the knives, before the crooning voice and the cold, black stone kin-raven pressed against his skin. It was Petronus.

Petronus rides to you.

"Neb?" The old Pope looked even older now. He'd lost weight, and now he wore trousers and a shirt that was far too big for him. A vicious pink scar ran along his throat, and his hair and beard had become a tangled, unruly mess. "Neb, can you hear me?"

He felt the woman near him now, too, and he quickly averted his eyes, careful not to take in any of the landscape. "Don't let them find you, Father," he said.

And then, the knife was to its work again and he was back to screaming as Petronus also spun away.

"Do not show them what they want to see, son," his father, Brother Hebda said. Suddenly, they were in the park near the Whymer orphanage where he had spent his childhood, there in the shadow of the Great Library and the Androfrancine Order. A summer breeze bent the birch branches.

Now, the woman was there with them, too. Only now she did not wear the dark silks or the close-cropped gray hair. Instead, she wore a simple black dress that hugged her curves in a way that made Neb suddenly uncomfortable. Her hair, now long and the color of ash, spilled down around her shoulders. "He will show us," she said, "eventually." When she smiled, she showed her teeth. She leaned in toward Neb there on the bench they shared. "And after we find the Abomination's hand servants, we'll come and find you as well, digger."

"Hold fast, Nebios," his father told him.

And then he, too, spun away.

"Hold fast," the woman said, repeating his father's words, "and let me hurt you more, Abomination."

Then, the blade was no longer on him. And neither was the token. He lay still, certain that any moment both would be back to spin him into a pain-frenzied, stomach-lurching dervish. When it didn't happen, he risked opening his eyes.

The sun was high and the sky spread out over him, a canopy of fierce blue that stretched beyond his peripheral vision. A breeze moved over him like hot breath on his cuts.

These were the times he tried to sleep, though he had no idea how much time passed between cuttings and how much sleep he actually found. At first, he'd used that time to try to ascertain something about the women who held him. But he'd given up on that some time ago now. The rest seemed more useful to him-it gave his mind the focus he needed, despite the pain, to keep his mind away from the one place they wished him to take them.

And it was working. But it took everything inside of him.

Still, he realized, each hour under the knife, it grew harder and harder.

He heard low voices talking nearby in an unfamiliar tongue, and then, a cool hand was on his arm, quickly pressing words he could not understand into his skin. He turned his head and saw the thirty-second daughter of Vlad Li Tam gazing down upon him. For the briefest moment, he saw concern in her eyes. Then, all emotion vanished from them.

"You will show us what we're looking for eventually, Abomination," she said in a flat voice. Then, she leaned closer, her mouth so close to his ear that none could hear but him. "It will not be long, Nebios. I swear it to you."

When she left, he fell into a light, dreamless sleep. He drifted there, feeling the heat gradually leaking out of his wounds and momentarily forgetting the dull ache of the rocky ground that bit into his back. He'd just reached a moment of oblivious peace when he was jarred awake by the sounds of pandemonium.

He opened his eyes, suddenly alert, but could see nothing but a twilight sky and its tentative moon. Still, he instantly placed the snarling and howling of kin-wolves mixed with the sounds of battle nearby.

Twisting his body, he pulled at the ropes that held him, but the stakes were driven too deep. He felt a light breeze, and a strong hand clamped down suddenly over his mouth. A strong arm snaked across his chest to hold him still.

Neb felt an instant of panic when he could not see the figure that now kept him from speaking or struggling. He felt the hot breath of a

mouth against his ear and heard the muffled but familiar voice.

"I followed them to you," Renard whispered. "You've been impossible to get close to until now."

Neb stifled a sob at the sound of the Waste guide's voice and tried not to cry. Relief flooded him, and he felt his body trembling from it.

Renard's hand stayed firm over his mouth. "Listen well, lad," he said. "They'll not kill you until they have what they want from you. I'm no match for them on my own, and I'm not sure the wolf trick will work more than once. Stay alive. I will be back for you." He paused, and Neb felt another hand giving a reassuring squeeze to his shoulder. "I will be back for you," Renard said again.

The hand loosened over his mouth, and Neb felt terror racing through him.

Don't leave me.

He wanted to shout the words, to shriek them, but instead, he swallowed against the fear. He'd watched a small number of blood-magicked scouts cut easily through a room of armed men at Rudolfo's Firstborn Feast. He quickly ciphered the odds and knew that Renard-a far more savvy scout and soldier than Neb-was right. He'd most likely used the urine of a female kin-wolf in heat to draw down a handful of males, but they would be no match for the four women who held him. Renard would not fare much better on his own.

Petronus rides for you. Once more, his father had spoken from his grave in Windwir. As the hand left his mouth and the arm lifted from his chest, Neb swallowed and formed words that he hoped Renard could hear within the raw rasp that his voice had become from days of screaming. "Petronus rides for me," he croaked.

If Renard heard, he did not answer. Already, there was yelping and yowling as the defeated wolves realized their mistake and fled the knives of Neb's captors.

Neb tried to will the trembling from his body, tried to take hold of the sobs that threatened him with a storm of tears.

He failed, but when he wept now, it was from the sure knowledge that he wasn't alone. He simply had to hang on, to keep averting his inner eye and inner ear from the mechoservitors at their work and the song that compelled them.

Neb closed his eyes again, and the next time he awoke, it was beneath the knife.

But this time, Nebios Homeseeker did not scream. Charles They rode the last two leagues in somber silence, Rudolfo and Isaak side by side in the lead and Charles behind them. They left their horses at the opening of the canyon, handing the reins over to scouts freshly recovered from their magicks and dressed in robes that matched the Androfrancine and his metal son.

I am too old for this, Charles thought. But it was something he'd thought often since that day his apprentice had drugged him and spirited him out of Windwir. Before his secret imprisonment by Sethbert and later, his nephew Erlund, he'd not considered himself especially old.

Perhaps losing everyone and everything you love in a span of hours changes one's perspective on time, he thought.

Rudolfo led them forward over freshly salted ice until the canyon walls narrowed and the downward slope was sealed away from the white sky as the base of the Dragon's Spine swallowed them.

When they reached the cave, it was crowded with men and buzzing with activity. A wooden frame had been set up over and around a large circular hole in the floor, and a system of pulleys had been rigged to move equipment in and out of the ground. Tables and chairs were strewn around the cavern, and men sat at some of them going over crudely sketched maps. Even as they stood, men started climbing from the well, ducking beneath the frame as they scrambled over the edge. They were followed at last by a mechoservitor-Number Eight, Charles thought-and a heavyset man with thick, curly hair, his face and hands black with grime. The man approached them.

"Lord Rudolfo," he said, inclining his head.

Rudolfo returned his nod. "Turik, how goes our exploration?"

"We've mapped extensive tunnels and chambers six leagues south and east. The western passages have been more difficult-a lot of debris and water-but we're making headway."

Rudolfo turned to Charles and Isaak. "This is Turik, chief engineer of our operation here. He's spent most of his life underground in our mines in Friendslip." He offered a grim smile. "Who'd have thought that for two millennia we've had a Whymer Maze beneath us." He looked back to his engineer. "This is Brother Charles, formerly arch-engineer of the Androfrancine Office of Mechanical Science and Technology and now attached to the new library. And Isaak, of course."

The man studied the two of them. "I received your message, Lord, and hoped to speak with you about it. I don't think it is prudent for-"

Rudolfo raised a hand and interrupted him. "It is not prudent. But neither will I prevent them. Isaak is most insistent about his ability to find their destination. I want your men to escort them as far west as you have mapped… but no farther." Rudolfo looked at Isaak, and Charles saw concern in the Gypsy King's eyes. "From that point, they are on their own."

On our own. It did not appeal to him, traveling underground passages into unfamiliar territories. But Isaak would go either with or without him, and the same curiosity that had driven him into

engineering in the first place so many years ago drove him now. Something had happened to his mechoservitors. He had resisted Introspect's order to send them alone and unsupervised into the Churning Wastes on the Sanctorum Lux project, but in the end, Holy Unction compelled his compliance. He had trained them to maintain themselves, had scripted them each for scheduled visits to the Keeper's Gate for a clandestine escort to his offices in Windwir for routine checkups. And something had happened. Somehow they had stumbled across the data coded into that song and had created a new script for themselves based upon it.

And it changed them. As it was now changing Isaak.

Isaak spoke, drawing Charles back to the present moment. "I am confident of my direction." He reached into the leather satchel he carried over his shoulder and drew out the book that the mechoservitor had given him. "There are rudimentary maps ciphered into the text of this book." He extended it to Rudolfo. "The mechoservitors attached to your operation should be able to decipher at least some of them. When they are finished, the book should be destroyed."

Charles felt his own eyebrows rise. Rudolfo raised his as well, a hand moving instinctively to his beard. "You would destroy a book?" the Gypsy King asked.

Isaak nodded. "I would destroy this book."

Charles saw the question on Rudolfo's face but asked it first. "Why?"

Isaak blinked, his eye shutters clicking. "Enemies of the light beset us. They must not be permitted to prevail." He paused, his body shaking slightly as his bellows wheezed. Charles saw water at the lower corners of his eyes, where he'd installed the tear ducts as per Rufello's Book of Specifications. "My analysis of your physiological and verbal cues indicates that you are displeased with me, Lord. It was never my intention to-"

Rudolfo raised his hand again. "Isaak," he said. His voice was low, and Charles thought for a moment that he might've heard it crack with emotion. "I am not displeased with you. I am displeased with this outcome and concerned by your decision." He waited a moment. "You understand some of my concerns, I think. Those that I have discussed with you."

Isaak nodded. "I will guard it, Lord. I swear. And the library will function adequately without my presence. I have reproduced from my memory scrolls all appropriate holdings contained therein and have left them with Mechoservitor Number One."

All appropriate holdings. Charles had not seen the scrolls but felt confident that all matters regarding the spell and the dream had been

carefully expunged from the scripts Isaak had left behind.

"But there is another concern," Rudolfo said, "that I have not discussed with you."

Isaak cocked his head, and Charles was struck yet again at how human his creation seemed. No, he realized, not seemed. Was. And becoming more so. "What concern is that, Lord Rudolfo?"

Charles watched the hardness soften in Rudolfo's eyes and watched the line of his jaw relax as the Gypsy King stepped closer. Isaak towered above the shorter man. Stretching himself to full height, Rudolfo embraced the metal man. "That I will miss my friend until he comes home to me."

For a moment-just a moment-the arch-engineer thought there were tears in the man's eyes. There was no mistaking Isaak's tears.

And when he was partway down the ladder, wrapped in the warmth of an unexpected wind that rose from beneath them, Charles discovered his own tears.

Blinking them away, he followed his dreaming son into the Beneath Places and wondered what they would find there.

16

The Devil You Know

FRANNIE

I can't remember once in my life ever hating that it was the weekend. But this weekend was hell. There were nightmares about alien body snatchers and convicts with hooks for hands. There were dreams about Luc and Gabe that I blush just thinking about. And twice I was sure I saw a black '68 Shelby drive past my house.

Belias, Avaira, me, we're all from…

And all day today at school I've felt like I was on some kind of possessed seesaw, up and down with Gabe and Luc. But after last-period government, I waste no time grabbing Luc's arm and dragging him to the parking lot. We climb into his car, and, as soon as the doors are closed, his lips are burning into mine. It feels amazing, so it's really hard to push him away.

"Tell me," I say into his lips.

"What?" he says into mine.

I force myself to push back from him. "What you were going to say Friday-in my room-before my mom showed up."

He reaches for me. "I don't remember."

I push back harder. "Belias, Avaira, me, we're all from…" I say to jog his memory.

For a second, his face pinches in a wince. "Later."

"Now."

His eyes grow hard, like black obsidian. "It's nothing."

"It didn't seem like nothing Friday."

He leans back in his seat, closes his eyes, and blows out a sigh. "You really don't want to know."

"Yes, I really do."

He pulls his head off the headrest and looks at me with tortured eyes. "I've done some pretty awful things."

I feel my gut knot. "So who hasn't?"

"I mean it, Frannie."

But all I can think is that there's nothing he could have done that's even close to what I have. And suddenly my throat is closing and my chest is tightening. And there's no air in the car. I push the door open and sort of stagger out onto the pavement.

Luc is there in a heartbeat. He pulls me to him, keeping me from falling over. "Frannie, what's wrong?"

Secrets.

I lean into him for a long time, gasping for air, then shove him away. I hate that he's here, seeing this. And I hate more that he thinks I need his help.

"I'm fine," I lie.

I can tell he doesn't believe me, and I don't care. But when he wraps his arms back around me, I let him. He sits me back on the seat of the car as my breathing eases.

"Sorry," I say without looking at him.

"What happened?"

"Nothing." I spin my legs into the car and grab the door handle. "Let's go."

He steps back and I close the door.

He's right. I don't really want to know his secrets. The ones I already have are enough.

Our bodies move together to the pounding rhythm of Depeche Mode's "Personal Jesus." As hard as it is, I push Luc's burning body away from mine and sit up on his big black bed, working to catch my breath. "I don't think Mr. Snyder is gonna accept 'we were too busy messing around' as an excuse for this outline not being done."

Luc grabs my hips and pulls me back down next to him. "We could try 'my dog ate it,' " he says hopefully, wrapping his arms around me again. I glower at him for a second before he groans and says, "How fast can we get this thing done?"

I slide up and prop myself against a stack of pillows on the headboard. "We only have the last few questions. It should go pretty quick."

He gets his composition book off the floor and sits against the headboard next to me, but he's not writing. He's staring at me. "You're going to have to put your shirt on, or I'm not going to be able to concentrate on this," he says after a minute. "That red bra is way too hot. I didn't think the pope let good Catholic girls wear red bras."

"I'm not a good Catholic girl, remember? I got thrown out of Catholic school."

"I remember," he says, and his smile makes my heart skip.

As Depeche Mode urges me to "reach out and touch faith," I trace the coil of the black serpent tattooed around his upper arm and ogle his bare chest.

"Okay, so… Steinbeck…," I say to distract myself from that smile- and that body. I draw a deep breath and pull my shirt on over my head. Looking down at Mr. Snyder's handout, I read, "What is he

saying about the character of man?"

"That anyone can justify anything, no matter how wrong."

I raise an eyebrow. "Really? 'Cause I didn't get that. I'm thinking his major upshot is that circumstances dictate actions."

"Same thing."

"Not really. Think about it. All through the book, Tom does things… makes choices based on what he and his family need at that moment. It's not like he just wakes up one day and says, 'Gee, I think I'll go kill somebody today.' "

"Okay, but then he does kill someone and goes on the run, where he's not helping his family because he can't work, and he may end up hurting them if they get caught helping him. So you can't say he only does things for the good of his family. People do things, and they wrap those choices in all kinds of noble garb, but in the end it's all self-serving."

I put the handout down. "Wow… so people are all just lying, scheming, self-serving shitbags?"

"Yep, pretty much."

"With no redeeming qualities whatsoever?"

"Sounds about right."

"That's sad," I say, shaking my head.

"Sad, but true."

"Okay, so what about Rose of Sharon at the end? She loses her baby but then breast-feeds a starving man. What's self-serving about that?"

He looks at me for a minute then smiles. "Sorry, you lost me at 'breast,' " he says, glancing at mine.

I elbow him. "You're such a pig."

He grins. "I'm not a pig, I'm a guy-which, now that I think about it, is pretty much the same thing. Point taken."

"I bet your heart is coal. It's no wonder you see the world through Hell's glasses," I say. Opening my composition book, I flip to the page headed "Steinbeck, wrap-up essay outline, Frannie and Luc" and write my last few bullet points. When I'm done I hand it to Luc and watch his face screw into a scowl.

"Well, your glasses are rose-colored, because this list is incredibly naive."

"Just 'cause I don't choose to believe that everyone's evil doesn't make me naive."

"Yes it does, but that's all the better for me. So where were we?" he says with a grin. He throws the composition book on the floor and eases my shirt over my head, staring at my red bra.

"I'll show you naive," I say.

His eyes flash and I swear he stops breathing when I smile my

own wicked smile and reach behind my back to unhook my bra, tossing it to the floor on top of my shirt. I roll in next to him on the bed and feel my skin melt into his. Luc kisses my neck and my ear, his hot breath pebbling my skin with goose bumps.

"Mmm, you're beautiful," he whispers in my ear. I shudder as a massive rush rolls through me. So is he.

My whole body is a live wire. I'm absolutely buzzing, every nerve ending on overload. With all the others, there was never any question that I was going to stop. I've never been ready. But none of them have ever made me feel like Luc does. Everything about him is wrong, but nothing has ever felt so right. The way I can't get him out of my head and my heart only feels full when we're together, how he makes everything feel new and exciting, the way I can picture myself with him-telling him everything.

He kisses me deeper as a tear slips from the corner of my eye. I feel like I'm suffocating, but I can't push him away. I want him closer.

LUC

All I can feel is her body next to mine. All there is is her body next to mine. The rest of the universe, Heaven and Hell included, has disintegrated into nothingness. By all that is unholy, I'm going to have her for all eternity. I won't stop until she's mine… in the Abyss… where she doesn't belong…

I push the thought away and focus on Frannie. Her eyes are closed and she's pressing into me, kissing me. I feel her hands on me-all over me. "Don't stop," she whispers hot in my ear, but she has no idea what she's asking. Because, despite what she thinks, she is naive. I know what lurks in the hearts of man and in my own brimstone heart.

All I have to do is take her. This is the first step on her path to the Abyss. She wants it; I want it… oh, how I want it.

I breathe in her chocolate and ginger-taste the currant and clove of her soul. I feel her hands on me, pulling at my jeans. Her kisses become deeper and more urgent. I can't wait any longer. I need her. Now.

I'm just on the edge of magicking the rest of our clothes away, imagining how her skin will feel against mine, picturing us together, when she pulls back and her eyes pierce mine to my black core. She lifts her hand, tracing my lips with the tip of her trembling finger, and I'm overwhelmed with the scent of warm chocolate.

Chocolate?

Could it be… love? Does she love me?

As her eyes lock on mine again, it all becomes clear. I'm going to stop, because somewhere along the way I've developed a human conscience, and that conscience is telling me that, no matter how much I want her with me forever, this is wrong. She needs to know what I am, to have a choice. I kiss her again, one last time, as if my life depended on it-which it pretty much does since, if I take this route, my next stop is the bottom of the Fiery Pit.

"We can't do this, Frannie." She looks away as I prop myself on an elbow above her. "Look at me," I say more firmly, "I'm not who you think I am."

And then I do it.

I feel myself cringe against her inevitable reaction as, with my mind, I push aside my human shell and let her see me in all my Hellish glory: dappled copper skin, shaggy black hair dangling in my slanted, bloodred cat's eyes; a straight, red gash of a mouth in my flat face; and the requisite black horns, of course. I can feel the fire under my skin as I start to steam, and I pull away, sure I'll burn her in this

form.

I don't know why, but I thought I might not feel as much for her when I shed my human shell. I was wrong. It turns out I feel more-for her and for me, because my love for her triggers disgust and loathing for myself. And the smell of brimstone, usually so pleasing, is making me sick. I'm making me sick.

I expect a scream and maybe the rustling of sheets as she backpedals away from me on the bed. I don't hear any of that, but I can smell her fear, sweet orange hanging thick in the air. I'm afraid to even look at her, sure I'll see my own disgust mirrored in her eyes.

But when I do look, I can tell she's not seeing me. Not really. Because what I see under a thin veil of shock is curiosity. Her eyes are wide and her breathing fast as she struggles to put words together. "So… what… I mean…"

"I'm a demon, Frannie," I interrupt, the anger in my voice directed inward. "From Hell."

She just stares at me, taking everything in, and myriad thoughts swim in her blue eyes. "From Hell," she repeats, her voice shaking.

"From Hell," I say softer, realizing that I've made a terrible mistake. What was I thinking? That she'd love me anyway? You're a fool, Luc.

The bedsprings creak as she hugs a pillow in front of her and sits up. Doubt clouds her eyes and a tear slips over her lashes, coursing a crooked path down her cheek, as she processes what she's seeing. "A demon…"

In answer, I groan and drop my face into the pillow. Because I know any minute she'll run. When the horror of the whole thing sinks in-when she figures out why I'm here-she'll run screaming from my apartment, and I can't bear to watch.

But the weight of her silence is crushing me. I roll off the bed and move to the window, staring blindly at the parking lot. She sniffles and I turn to face her. She just stares at me with big, frightened eyes, and I hate that it's me that's scared her. I feel myself being drawn back to the bed to comfort her.

But I can't go back.

I can never go back now that she knows what I am. I've lost her.

Self-loathing overwhelms me, and I start to hope that the invisible fist clenching my heart will snuff out its rhythm and kill me. But instead of directing my fury where it belongs, I hear my voice, low and strangled, lash out at her. "What the Hell is wrong with you? You should be terrified! Run!"

For a moment, she looks like she might. And I really want her to. I want her to run hard and fast and never look back.

But, Satan save me, I want her to stay more.

It's a good thing that I don't have to breathe, because I'm fairly certain I wouldn't be able to. I lean back against the wall, slouching down it and staring at the ceiling with my fingers laced over my horns, and wait an eternity for her to do something. Anything.

Finally, unable to help myself, I drop my gaze back to her.

Her face is brooding, her brow creased. Her voice is heavy, pensive. She hugs the pillow tighter. "This can't be real." She rubs her eyes and looks back at me.

I would give anything for it not to be. I hang my head. "It's real."

For a minute she's quiet and I can almost hear her thinking. "I've always known there was something… dark… and sort of dangerous about you," she says, finally.

I slide up the wall to a stand. "Are you hearing me, Frannie? I'm more than 'sort of dangerous'!"

She flinches a little but doesn't move from the bed. I watch, expecting terror to dawn on her face at any second, but instead, her expression turns furious and black pepper floods the room. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm telling you now."

"I mean before. You let me…" she spins off the bed and glares at me, gripping the pillow so tight I'm sure it will rip. "I love you," she spits in accusation.

She said it.

And it's there-warm chocolate underlying the scorch of black pepper in my nostrils. In that instant, all my insides turn to pure energy, and I feel my brimstone heart explode.

But it doesn't matter, because this is the part where she runs.

Her eyes widen as what she just said dawns on her. She slides back onto the bed and sits there, for a long, agonizing minute, staring at me, her jaw slack and disbelief stamped all over her face. "I… I didn't…" Her eyes drop to the sheets.

There's nothing I can say. I can't reach out to tell her I love her too. So I hang my head and wait for the slam of the door as she bolts.

But the door doesn't slam. Instead, she says, "So, what's the deal? Do you have to go back?"

I look up and a sardonic bark of a laugh leaves my throat. Of all the things she could have asked… "Eventually."

She grabs her shirt from the floor, tugging it over her head, then glares at me. "I knew you'd leave."

My lips pinch together in a grimace, and I shake my head. "That's what you're worried about? For the sin of Satan, Frannie, I'm a demon. You should be hoping I'll leave."

"Fine," she says, shoving her composition book into her book bag. And that's when I notice the shake in her hands. "I'll save you the

trouble," she snarls.

She throws her book bag over her shoulder and searches the floor as my insides churn.

"Damn it!" she yells in frustration. "Where are my goddamn flip-flops?"

I bend down and scoop them off the floor, holding them out to her.

She storms over and rips them out of my hand. But then she hesitates, staring at my horns. She starts to lift her hand as her eyes drop to mine, the curiosity back. "Can I…" But then she drops her hand and shakes her head, as if trying to clear it.

"What?" I hear the hope in my voice and despise myself even more for it.

"Nothing." She wheels and strides toward the door. But before she reaches it she spins back. She stares hard into my eyes for a long minute then pulls a deep breath. "So, now that I know what you are, am I going to Hell for falling for you anyway?" A shaky smile plays at the corners of her mouth as she wipes a tear off her cheek with the back of her hand.

And, suddenly, warm chocolate overpowers her black pepper. Just for a second, the heart throbbing in my chest doesn't feel like brimstone. I can't believe that she knows what I am-the real me-and she loves me anyway. But then the reality of that sinks in.

"Frannie, no… this isn't right," I groan. I let my knees buckle and slide down the wall to sit, my head in my hands. She shouldn't still love me. This can only end badly.

She walks back to the center of the room, drops her book bag, and perches on the corner of the bed. "Do you care about me at all?"

I pull my head out of my hands and look up at her on the bed. I know what I should say, and my mouth opens to form the word "no." But instead, what I hear escape very softly from my lips is, "Yes." And hearing myself say it shocks me out of my stupor. I spring to my feet and channel all the ice from my dying brimstone heart into my words. "I mean no. I was just doing my job."

"I don't believe you," she says, fiery incredulity in her words and her face.

She should be screaming. Running. Anything but this. I spin around and throw a general growl out at the world-and catch my reflection in the mirror on the bathroom door.

What the Hell?

I walk to the mirror and stare at myself as I work harder to push off my human form. When nothing changes, I turn back to her.

"Frannie. Look at me and tell me exactly what you see. What's different?"

"Well… the horns are kinda new, and your eyes are glowing a little more than usual. And I hate to say it, but you stink." She scrunches her face and pinches her nose. "Can you turn off the rotten eggs? I like cinnamon better."

"That's all?"

"Is there supposed to be more?"

Tail… hooves… fangs. "Well… yeah."

"Like?"

"Nothing." I grab my T-shirt off the floor and yank it on. "We're going for a ride."

17

For Heaven's Sake

FRANNIE

We run through the rain, my hand in Luc's, and slide into his car. I'm afraid to ask, but I do anyway. "Where are we going?"

"There's only one person-and I use that term loosely-that might know what the hell is going on," he says as he starts the car.

As Luc drives the storm picks up, and by the time we pull up to Gabe's house it's a full-on deluge, fat drops of rain sheeting the windshield and pounding on the roof like a thousand tiny hammers. And the whole way, all I can think about is that I told him I love him.

What was I thinking?

He's a demon. I still can't get my mind around what that even means. He had horns.

And I told him I love him.

Oh God! Where did that even come from?

I don't love him, do I?

No. Love doesn't exist.

But neither do demons.

I glance at Luc as he cuts the engine and turns to look at me. I'm terrified of him, but as stupid as I know it is, my terror has nothing to do with him not being human.

Oh God. Do I love him?

He pulls me out of the car and up the walk onto the porch to ring the bell. All the windows are dark.

"Maybe he's not home," I say, hoping. 'Cause I'm not ready to do this with the two of them.

"He's here," Luc answers just before the door opens and the sight of Gabe takes my breath away.

I can't be here with both of them. Not when I'm this confused. 'Cause three days ago I was just as terrified at the realization that I might love Gabe.

I turn to Luc. "Is this a good idea?"

"He might know what's happening."

"Happening to who?" Gabe asks, reaching for my hand and pulling me through the door.

"Me," Luc says, following behind.

Gabe turns on the light, and stares Luc down. "So…?" he asks, closing the door behind us.

"I can't change," Luc says, his voice heavy and low.

Gabe looks shocked, like he actually knows what Luc is talking about and it means something. "Show me."

Luc steps back from me, closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and sprouts small, black horns. I stare, fascinated, and resist the urge to reach up and touch them.

"Try harder."

"That's it. That's all I got."

"And he's not as hot as before," I add. Luc looks at me, and there's something in his eyes-hope, maybe.

Understanding dawns on Gabe's face. "I was wondering…"

Luc's horns are gone. "Wondering what?"

"Do you remember telling me that you didn't want Frannie to get hurt?"

Luc's eyes shift to mine. "Yes."

"And I told you I believed you."

"Yes."

"It was starting then. Your thoughts were hanging right out there for any old angel to hear. I can't hear a demon's thoughts."

Luc's eyes narrow. "You've been in my head?" he growls.

Gabe snorts. "Yeah. And I have to tell you, your plan sucked. You loved her, whether you knew it or not-a fact that shot the rest of your sad plan to Hell, so to speak."

My eyes snap to Luc.

He loves me too?

Luc glares at Gabe and turns to stare out the window.

My mind is reeling, thoughts, images, and emotions all flying around at random. I'm hearing and thinking things I know are impossible-but I also know they're true. And there's a tiny piece of my core that feels relieved, like it knew this was coming.

Luc-Lucifer-hot-horns-demon. It somehow seems more real now, with Gabe standing here, than it did in Luc's apartment.

Gabe.

I hear my breath catch in some distant place as the pieces of the puzzle click together in my head. Gabe-Gabriel-his glowing smile-and all his warnings. And, what he just said… for any old angel to hear.

No.

I look at Gabe, unable to clear the stunned expression from my face. Angel?

He looks at me, eyes cautious, and answers my unspoken question aloud. "Yes."

"No!"

Why is that so much harder to accept than Luc being a demon?

Because there are no angels-no Heaven-no God.

The room spins, and I bend over, bracing my hands on my knees, trying to pull air into my collapsing lungs. But my throat tightens more as I think about Matt, completely cutting off my airway.

If there's a God, why did he take my brother?

My legs go out, and the last thing I feel before I black out is Gabe swinging me into his arms.

When I open my eyes, Luc's worried face is the first thing I see. He's sitting on the edge of the couch, holding my hand. Gabe is pacing behind him. I pull a shuddering breath and try to sit, but Luc lowers me gently back down on the couch, adjusting the throw pillow behind my head.

"I don't understand any of this." My voice is little more than a rasping whisper.

Luc gazes down at me, promising everything with his eyes. "Ask me anything."

My thoughts are a hopeless, twisted jumble and what comes out is a ramble. "You're here… both of you… what… why?" I finally manage through a dry mouth with a shaking voice.

His voice is soft, like he's talking to a frightened child-which, I guess, he is. "Because that's where you are."

"Me… you're here for me…?" I feel the blood drain from my head again, and stars dance in front of my eyes.

"Yes."

"Why?" I whisper.

A sardonic smile quirks Gabe's lips as he sits on the arm of the couch at my feet. "I'm here to protect you from him." He nods toward Luc.

My whole body shakes and I feel like I could puke. "Protect me from… Luc?"

Gabe turns to Luc, the disdain clear on his face. "You didn't tell her? You're a real piece of work, you know that?"

Luc looks tormented as he stands abruptly and moves to the window. His hand grips the window frame so hard I'm surprised the wood doesn't splinter, and his gaze drops to the floor.

Gabe eases in next to me on the couch. He folds me into his arms and I sink into him. "He's here to tag your soul for Hell."

"Tag my soul…" I feel my head start to swim again as stars flash brighter in my eyes. Then my throat starts to close off when I think about why I belong in Hell. "Because of… what happened?"

Gabe pulls me tighter to him. "No. It has nothing to do with that."

Luc turns back from the window and looks at Gabe and me with

the question in his eyes.

I pull my gaze away from him and settle deeper into Gabe. "Then, why me?"

Gabe pierces Luc with a steel gaze, and Luc looks suddenly unsure. "I never knew for sure," he finally says. "All I knew is that I needed to tag her."

"Hmm, so Beherit must have a lot of faith in you, then," Gabe says, sarcasm overflowing.

Luc stares death at Gabe. "Shut the hell up. It's not my place to know." But then he looks at me in Gabe's arms, and his gaze drops to his hands.

"Touchy, aren't we." Gabe's expression softens. "You have a good guess, though."

Luc nods but doesn't say anything.

Gabe pulls me closer. "You're special, Frannie. You have special… skills. Certain gifts that both sides would kill-literally-to get their hands on."

"Both sides… like, Heaven and Hell?"

He nods.

"I don't have any gifts."

"But you do." He looks at Luc. "Doesn't she?"

Luc's eyes shift tentatively from the floor to mine. "You see things, Frannie."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You have Sight… visions. Ghalib, Taylor's dad. You knew."

My throat tightens as I think about my nightmares-things I saw before they happened. The faces that follow the lightning in my head: Matt, Grandma, Ghalib, Mr. Stevens, and so many others.

Gabe pulls back and looks into my eyes. "But there's more. Something even bigger."

I look back at Luc and his face goes white. He shakes his head slowly. Gabe looks up at him and nods.

"Sway…" Luc whispers, his brow creasing as if he had a sudden headache. He drops his head and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Unholy Hell…"

"What?" I say. A shudder runs down my spine and Gabe pulls me close again.

"Hitler, Moses… what do they have in common?"

I'm in no frame of mind to work out a riddle. "Just tell me what's going on." I hate that my voice sounds so small and weak.

"You know the story of Moses. He had the ability to make people listen: to sway their opinions, their thoughts. There had never been anyone like that before. When Lucifer saw what he could do, how God worked through him, he realized he'd screwed up. The next time

someone showed up with that same degree of Sway, Lucifer wasn't going to get beat out. He fought-dirty, I might add," he says, glaring at Luc, "and he won. We all know what happened in Nazi Germany. There hasn't been another with that same power until now." He shares a meaningful glance with Luc and then looks back at me. "You."

I look at Luc, who's standing wide-eyed and slack-jawed, horrified.

"Listen, here's the deal. If they get to you," Gabe juts his chin toward Luc, "influence you, you're Hitler-but worse. If you stay with us, you're Moses. Your power is only going to get stronger." His jaw clenches and he shakes his head. "And you're not naive for believing people are innately good, Frannie."

I feel so small, my whole body collapsing down on itself as everything real, everything I've ever known, vanishes. Pieces of a hundred questions tease me, but I can't put them together in a way that makes sense-except one.

"Why now?" I hear myself whisper.

"You're coming into your own now. When you were young, we were able to Shield you, to keep you off their radar." He shoots a glance at Luc. "But not anymore."

My voice is still a harsh whisper. It's all I can manage. "What do you want from me?"

He traces a finger along the collar of my shirt to my chest and taps it there, over my heart. "Just for you to follow your heart. Do what's right."

I bark out a mirthless laugh that doesn't even sound like mine. "I'm no saint."

"I never said you were. But, like it or not, this is what you are. Who you are. And my job is to be here for you-in any way you need me."

And as he says it, I know Gabriel is right. This is what I felt in her soul. It's why Beherit sent me out looking for her and why King Lucifer wants her so badly that he's willing to chance breaking a rule or two.

She looks stunned-eyes wide like a deer in the headlights. "You guys got the wrong sister. You must be mixing me up with Grace."

Gabriel nestles his face into her hair. "You're already swinging the balance. You, Frannie. Not Mary or Kate or Grace or Maggie. You. If you have the power to transform Shit-for-Brains over there," he glowers at me, "just imagine the difference you can make in the mortal realm. The difference you've probably already made without even knowing it."

My back hits the wall as if someone pushed me, and my legs won't hold me anymore. I slide down the wall and sit on the floor.

Sway.

Frannie's got Sway. And if what Gabriel just implied is true, her power has never been rivaled in a mortal. He's saying her power is what changed me-a creature of Hell. And not just my mind, but my physical being. How is that possible? Even Moses had no influence over the celestial or infernal. And if that's true, it's not just the masses she can sway. She has power beyond that of even King Lucifer. She could change the shape of Heaven and Hell.

My king's words echo in my head. It's my turn. This is my chance. I will be out from under Him-finally. King Lucifer thinks He can manipulate Heaven-maybe even the Almighty-through Frannie.

"Be careful what you wish for," she whispers, as lost in her own thoughts as I am in mine.

There's torment in Gabriel's eyes as he looks into Frannie's. "Your power is getting stronger every day. You need to see that you have pull on people's thoughts and emotions and therefore their actions." He glances toward me and his eyes drop to her hand, where he twines his fingers with hers. "And it's not just people you have that effect on. You'll always get what you want if it's in your control."

Frannie pulls away from him and suddenly there's rage. Black pepper floods the room. "I want my brother back. I don't have that," she spits.

He looks at her with sad eyes. "The only one with control over that is God."

All I can do is watch as her expression shifts from rage through shock into panic. "This is wrong. I'm not a saint or an angel. I'm not even a good person. I'm going to Hell. I already know that."

Why would she think that? I look at Gabriel. His expression is pained and sickeningly sympathetic. He pulls her to his shoulder and she melts into him. When the scent of Frannie's warm chocolate seeps through his celestial stench, I feel something cold and black wrap around my heart and squeeze. I'd kill him if I didn't think Frannie needed him.

"What happened-the reason you think you're going to Hell-it wasn't your fault," he says into her hair.

"You're so full of shit," she spits, pulling away. "I killed my brother."

The bottom drops out of my stomach. The boy in the picture-that explains the haunted look in her eye when I asked about him. So much pain-the same pain that was buried so deep that first day we met, when I asked what she'd like to undo.

Gabriel is still looking at her, shaking his head. "You didn't kill him, Frannie. It was his time. That's all."

It's like watching a volcano erupt. The words spill out of her mouth like burning lava. "Yeah. Just keep telling yourself that if it makes you feel better about stealing children from their families."

Gabriel slides a little closer to her on the couch, but she moves away. "He is with his family. God called him home."

"Well, then, your God sucks."

I move across the room and sit next to her. I take her hand, wanting-no, needing-to do something to ease her pain.

"I think what Gabriel said is true, Frannie. If you killed him you'd already be tagged for Hell, and you're not."

"Well, I should be," she says, pulling herself away from my touch.

I lift her chin with my finger, staring down into her deep sapphire eyes. "No, you shouldn't," I say and lean in to kiss her. For only the third time, I push my power on Frannie, to draw out all her pain and her misdirected anger. It's not nearly enough, but it's all I know how to do.

I hesitate, but then I look into those black eyes that can see my soul. And when his lips touch mine, I feel everything shift, and all my anger melts away. When his eyes finally release me I feel calm, the acid in my core and the ache in my heart gone.

Gabe pulls a deep sigh and looks at me with wounded eyes, and my guilt crushes me. I need them both in ways I can't even understand. Gabe moves across the room and sits in the chair under the window.

I drop my head and stare into my lap.

Luc squeezes me. "So, back to my original question. What the hell is happening to me? What exactly is it that I'm transforming into?" He glowers at Gabe. "Not one of you. Please, for the love of all things unholy, tell me I'm not going to become some goody-two-shoes angel. I couldn't take it."

Gabe glowers back. "Don't know. Anything's possible. Let me know if you start sprouting wings."

I look up at Gabe. "Could he become like me? Human?"

Luc looks at me with that same hopeful expression I saw on his face earlier. Gabe answers, resigned. "It's possible. This is unprecedented as far as I know. I have no clue what's happening, except it's clearly happening and it's just as clearly significant. And you're the key. You're going to change the world, Frannie. This is big."

"Big…" I say, trying to figure out what that means. "So, are we talking, like, 'bringing him to Jesus' big," I say, waving my hand in Luc's direction, "or 'virgin birth' big?"

Luc scowls and a smile just touches the corners of Gabe's mouth. "Based on what you're capable of, I'd be thinking more along the lines of 'virgin birth' big. Although, if you could bring him to Jesus, that'd be pretty huge too."

Luc bolts off the couch and is across the room like a shot, eyes storming. "You can't be serious."

"Don't be such a doofus. If it wasn't big, would He have sent me? Her name is Mary, after all. Could anyone without Sway convince the masses of a virgin birth? The second coming of Christ?" A grin far too mischievous to ever be considered angelic flits across Gabe's face. "What's wrong, Lucifer? You don't want to be Joseph?"

Luc wheels around and braces his hands on the wall, sending up a growl that curls my hair. "Unholy Hell! This can't be happening." Then he spins back and stares at me, eyes wide.

I pull myself out of the couch and stand there, not sure what I'm feeling. I think about Gabe's kiss. If that was Heaven, I want more. I

remember thinking I could just live there, in that peace and love. But that's not what he's saying-not what he's offering. I'm supposed to have some power, to do something with it that's supposed to save people. And as I think about that, panic takes over, making it a little hard to breathe.

Gabe tucks me into his side and wraps his arms around me. This time I let him, 'cause I need him. I melt into him as his summer snow buries me in calm and my breathing starts to ease.

When I can get enough air, I look up at him. "What's going to happen to me?"

His eyes are miles deep. I want to dive right into them. "Well, first off, this." He leans in and kisses my cheek, too close to my mouth, and my heart speeds up despite his calm. "You know I'll always be here for you. If you ever need anything," he glares at Luc, "you know where to come." Distress creeps into his eyes. "But after that, I'm not sure."

I press deeper into Gabe as Luc glares at us from the window. "You're playing a little fast and loose with those wings, don't you think?" he spits at Gabe.

In response, Gabe pulls me tighter into his body and smirks at Luc, but I see the uncertainty in his eyes. I sink into him and let his summer snow bury me so I don't have to think.

18

Angels and Demons

FRANNIE

It's almost comical to watch these guys. They're so busy trying to hate each other that they don't see how alike they are. Well… alike except for one being all dark and dangerous and the other blinding me with his radiance. But other than that…

I'm starting to get my mind around some of this. In the week since Luc and Gabe filled me in, they've both backed off to give me room to think. And Gabe's backed off in other ways. We're almost never alone together, and he's hardly touched me. Which I'm not sure I'm happy about. I haven't asked him why, but I'm pretty sure Luc's comment about losing his wings might have something to do with it.

All the white in Gabe's kitchen creates a glare, and I'm not sure Gabe's not adding to it. He glowers at Luc, and Luc stares him down, challenging him.

"It's beyond my comprehension how, after everything you've seen, you can still have that attitude. The only reason the Almighty doesn't send another flood is that the first one was useless."

Gabe shakes his head. "People do stuff every day to prove you wrong. Completely selfless acts of kindness."

"I disagree. Nothing is selfless. At the bottom of every good deed, there's a self-serving motive."

"Dude, you need to lighten up."

I roll my eyes. "Give it up, Gabe. He's hopeless." I open my calculus book on the kitchen table and push my empty ice cream bowl aside. "I know you guys are geniuses and all, but finals start tomorrow, and I've got to study or UCLA is gonna change their mind about me."

Luc looks at me and smiles. "What's the deal with UCLA anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just curious why you feel compelled to go three thousand miles away for college."

"Well… partly 'cause it's three thousand miles away. But really, they have the top international relations program in the country, and I'm thinking I can double major in political science or maybe Middle Eastern studies."

Luc raises an eyebrow. "And do what?"

I feel warmth creep into my cheeks. "I think that most of the crap that happens in the world is 'cause people don't know how to talk to each other. You know, 'cause of differences in culture or religion. Stuff like that. That's why I started that whole pen pal thing. I wanted to try to understand. So… I guess I'm thinking I'd like to do something bigger. Not quite sure what or how…"

Gabe smiles. His glow is blinding me again. "Lofty goals."

"Shut up," I say, embarrassed. I know how stupid it sounds, what I want to do, but I've always wanted it. I've always been good at talking to people, helping them find common ground. Like now, with Luc and Gabe-although I think their only common ground might be me, so I guess that doesn't really count.

"And you think you're going to make a difference." Luc's expression is serious now.

"Probably not. But it can't hurt to try," I say, watching my fingers twirl the pencil on my calculus book.

"You will make a difference, Frannie." Gabe is suddenly as serious as Luc.

"Will I? I'm not sure I'll get the chance."

Luc and Gabe share a wary glance. They know I'm right. Then Luc looks hard at Gabe, and, behind his eyes, there's anguish. "Tag her."

"You're even dumber than you look," Gabe says with a sardonic smile and a shake of his head.

"What's stopping you?"

Gabe's expression darkens as his eyes shift to mine. "Frannie's stopping me."

My stomach's in my throat. "Hold up. How am I going to have a life if I'm tagged for Heaven? How is that better than being tagged for Hell?"

I watch as Luc struggles with the answer. "The Almighty…" He hesitates and glances at Gabe for confirmation. Gabe nods and Luc continues. "He won't use you as… poorly."

"But He'll still use me. It won't be my life anymore." Resentment and anger are threatening to take control of me. I stuff them into the black pit. "I don't want to be Moses or Hitler. I want to be Frannie."

Gabe finally speaks. "If you're tagged for Heaven, I can protect you. It would be extraordinarily difficult to reverse your tag, and eventually they'll stop trying. If you remain untagged, they'll keep coming for you."

"And so will you." My heart sinks. There's no way out of this. Suddenly I feel claustrophobic-trapped and terrified. I slide my calculus book in front of me with a shaking hand. "So, do you guys get this stuff?" I say, needing to change the subject.

Luc's worried gaze lingers a moment longer, but he takes my cue. He pulls my book toward him. "Which one are you working on?"

I slip my paper out from under his fingers, and he jerks his hand.

"Ow!"

Gabe cracks a smile. "Ow? You're kidding, right?"

When Luc lifts his hand and turns it over, a tiny bead of crimson blood is sprouting on the tip of his middle finger. A paper cut.

"Well, that answers that," Gabe says.

Luc just stares, openmouthed, at the growing bead of blood. Then he turns to me with a tentative smile on his lips just before he loops his other hand behind my neck and pulls me into a kiss.

When he finally lets me go, I look into his smiling eyes. "What did I miss?" I ask, a little breathless and totally confused.

He grins. "Demons don't bleed."

Gabe's eyes are storming as Luc lets me go and I try not to feel guilty. "And neither do angels," he says.

LUC

I try to wrap my mind around what this means on the way home, but I'm having a hard time. Am I mortal? Am I turning human? I think about what that would mean for Frannie and me as she sits next to me in the Shelby with her head on my shoulder. My pulse pounds in my ears-something new-as I think about all the possibilities. Can we be together? Really together?

But a downside of turning human is that the thread that binds me to the nefarious is thinning. Good and bad. Good because I've decided that they're a bunch of shitbags and I really don't want to be in their heads anymore. Bad because I can't tell when they're here. If I can't tell when they're here, I can't protect Frannie from them.

I take my right hand off the wheel to pull a small box out of the console between the seats and wrap my arm around her shoulders, holding it in front of her face. "I have something for you."

"What is it?"

"Well, how it works is you take the box out of my hand and open it," I say with a grin.

"Jerk," she mumbles, grabbing the box and yanking it open. She pulls the crucifix out by the chain and watches it dangling there for a long minute.

"Put it on. The cross is iron with gold edging, and the Jesus is silver and platinum."

She looks at me, a cynical expression almost masking the mischievous gleam in her eye. "I can see that. If you're trying to lure me into bed with gifts, this was the wrong choice."

I can't help chuckling. "That really wasn't my intention, but I'll tuck that tidbit away for future reference."

"So… is this a joke?" she says eyeing me warily.

"No. It's a weapon."

"I thought it was vampires that have a problem with crosses."

"They do. But in this case, the other side keeps saying 'Jesus saves' and I'm hoping they're right."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Every demon has a weakness-something programmed into us by King Lucifer at the time of our creation to keep us from becoming too powerful." A product of His paranoia, no doubt. "Mine is gold. I don't know what Belias's is, or Avaira's, but this crucifix hits on the most common weaknesses. I want you to wear this, and if either of them comes near you, gouge it into them or scratch them with it. It will at least slow them down a little."

"You really think I need this?"

I turn away from the road and look her dead in the eye. "We need all the help we can get." I watch as her eyes widen. She loops the chain around her neck and fingers the crucifix.

"Why is this happening?" she asks, her voice deceptively calm.

My grip on the steering wheel tightens. "I don't know."

She looks up at me with big, wounded eyes. "Whatever Gabe thinks I'm supposed to do… I don't want it."

"I don't think it's a choice. Your Sway is something you're born with, like blue eyes or blond hair."

"But I can change those things-wear contacts or dye my hair."

"That's not really changing them, it's just disguising the truth. Your Sway is going to be difficult to hide."

She sinks into the seat, dejected. "How can I make them all just leave me alone?"

"I don't think you can. Hell won't stop coming for you until you're tagged, one way or the other."

She groans and buries her face in her hands. "I just want to be me. I want to have my life."

I reach for her and she drops a hand into mine. I squeeze it. "We're both going to find a way out, Frannie. I promise." I just have no clue what it is yet. I stare out the windshield, because the only way out I can see for her is to let Gabriel tag her. "Frannie?"

"Yeah."

I hesitate. "Will you tell me about your brother?"

She lifts her head and looks at me warily. "Why?"

"Because I can see how much you're hurting."

Her face darkens and her eyes look haunted. "What do you want me to say? I killed him. End of story."

"I know that's not true."

She pulls her hand away from mine and folds her arms tightly across her chest. "Yes it is."

"Tell me what happened."

She turns to face the window. "No."

"Please, Frannie."

I reach for her hand again, but she yanks it away. She turns back to me and her expression is feral, a pinched snarl. The bitter scent of garlic rolls off of her, filling the car. "Get out of my face, Luc."

I pull a deep breath. "It might help to talk about it."

My sympathetic tone only serves to aggravate her more. "Nothing's going to help. He's dead!" she spits.

I pull over to the shoulder and she reaches for the door handle. I reach across and grasp her arm before she can get it open.

She squirms out of my grasp. Garlic and black pepper sting my nose. "Leave me alone, you bastard!" Angry tears flow freely down her

face as she glares up at me.

"Let me help. Please…"

With surprising strength she pushes me hard into the door.

"I… hate you," she says. But there's no conviction. She sounds defeated, spent. Her face drops into her hands again as all her anger dissolves into tears. When her sobs slow, I brush the tangled locks off her damp face. She stares silently back at me as the last of her tears roll down her cheeks.

"We were in a tree." Her voice breaks with every word. "He loved to climb trees… and…" Her body hitches as she tries to stifle another sob. "He was climbing so fast. I couldn't keep up." She turns her head away from me and leans on the door. She makes a sound like a wounded animal, somewhere between a whimper and a moan, and then she's still for a long time.

"He fell?" I finally prompt.

She heaves a sigh. "I was so mad…" Before she can finish the thought her voice chokes off and silent tears start again.

I slip my arm cautiously around her and pull her to me. She leans into me and I hold her and say nothing until she's ready to talk. When she does, her words are barely audible. "I hated that he could climb faster, so I… grabbed his leg…" She pauses and I pull her tight to me. "I ran for Mom, but…" Her voice is a raw wound, catching in her throat with every word. "He was my… twin… the other half of me. And I killed him."

And there goes my brimstone heart, shattering into a million pieces. "I'm so sorry," I whisper into her hair. "But you were only seven, Frannie. It wasn't your fault." I pull her closer and wish there was some way I could fix this for her. But even my magic can't banish her personal demons. She's got to face those down on her own. All I can do is hold her while she cries.

As I sit here with my face buried in her hair, feeling the sobs rack her body, I wonder if love truly does conquer all, because otherwise, despite what I promised her, I think we're screwed.

FRANNIE

When we get back to Luc's, Taylor and Riley are sitting on the hood of Riley's car in the parking lot, and I'm trying to remember when I told them where he lives. "What the hell are they doing here?"

"Gearing up to kick my ass, no doubt," Luc says.

"Well, you deserve it."

He looks at me from under an arched eyebrow, making me tingle all over.

We pull into a parking spot near Luc's building, and I work to get myself together as they bounce over to us. I'm happy to see Taylor looking almost herself again. Today was her first day back at school after her dad, and she's been pretty down.

"We came to kidnap you," Riley says, wrapping her arms around me from behind.

"You're coming with us. Girls' night," Taylor says.

"It's not 'night' and it's not Wednesday. What's the deal?"

"Just shut up and do as you're told," she smirks.

I step forward and hug her. "How you holding out?"

She looks a little confused for a second then says, "Fine."

"Did your dad come home today?"

She glances quickly at Riley and back. "Yeah."

"He's doing okay?"

"Yeah."

I wait for her to elaborate, but then decide she must not want to talk about it. "So, what's going on?"

"You're coming with us."

"Sorry. Luc and I are kinda busy," I say.

He looks at me, and I see his eyes drop to the crucifix under my shirt. "No, it's okay… I think you should go."

I glower at him. "I thought we had plans." At least I did. Plans involving cool sheets and warm bodies…

"Go ahead, Frannie." He steps away from us, scanning the lot and buildings with growing concern on his face.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah," he almost growls. "Just go."

Something's not right. I force my eyes away from Luc and scan the parking lot then shift them to Taylor. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," she says with a sparkle in her eye.

When I turn to kiss Luc good-bye his eyes are still darting.

"What's up?" I whisper in his ear as he leans down.

"Nothing. I'll see you later." He kisses me, and I force myself to let him go.

I slide into the back of Riley's car. As we pull out of the parking lot, Riley keeps looking at me in her rearview mirror.

"So, really. What are we doing?" I ask.

"You'll see," she says into the mirror.

"How did you guys find me? I never told you where Luc lives."

Riley glances at me in the mirror again. "Yeah, you did. Remember that time at school?"

"Actually, no. So…" I look back at Luc's complex, fading into the distance, "this is all a little weird, don't you think?"

Taylor turns and looks at me. "You've been blowing us off for Lucifer. You left us no choice."

Lucifer? Suddenly alarms are ringing in my head. I work to stay calm. Panicking isn't going to help anything. I feel the weight of the crucifix against my chest and breathe into it. "Yeah, I guess. Sorry. But what about Riley and Trevor? They're just as bad." I watch for Taylor's reaction.

They share a quick glance, then Taylor turns back to me with a grin and says, "Yeah… I had to kidnap her too."

Wrong reaction. Shit! And as I look at her, I notice for the first time that her eyes are glowing red. Just a little behind her gray irises, but enough that it's just noticeable in the shadows of the car.

I don't know what's going on, except I'm pretty sure I'm screwed.

I look for a spot to bail, but by now we're out of town and there are no more stop signs. We're heading out into the middle of nowhere. Riley's driving much faster than usual, or I'd open the door and jump. I'm trying not to freak as I look out at our surroundings… and then I get it. We're heading up to the quarry.

We park near the trail into the swimming pit, and I open the door and start to move away from the car.

Taylor-or whoever this is-swings behind me in a flash. "Hey, where you going?"

That's a really good question. Where am I going? I look up the dirt road. The main road is at least half a mile away and the dense woods are quiet. Too early for the groups of summer swimmers. There's nowhere to run. "Nowhere. So, what are we doing here?"

"Just hanging out. Maybe skinny-dipping. Sound good?"

Yeah, sounds great. "Not really up for skinny-dipping. Water's freezing."

Taylor shoots a glance at Riley, and her eyes flash red. "We'll have to huddle up for body heat," she says with a lascivious grin.

This is bad. I watch Riley slide her keys into the pocket of her cutoff shorts as she heads up the path. Taylor is hanging back, waiting for me to go first. I follow Riley, trying to figure out how to get those keys.

We wind our way down the wooded path, and when we get to the quarry, Taylor saunters over to the edge and sits on a rock. Her eyes flash, and an evil smile turns up the corners of her mouth. "I say we get naked. The water looks great."

"Mmm… sounds good." Riley says, eyeing me with that same gleam. "But I gotta take a piss. I'll be right back." She slinks off into the woods. Crap-there went the keys.

Taylor gets up and comes over to where I'm standing. "You look so uptight. Chill," she says, grabbing my hand and pulling me to the rocks. She's as hot as Luc ever was. She sits me down and stands behind me, rubbing my shoulders, then starts pulling my shirt over my head.

I yank it down. "It's way too cold for that. I'm serious," I say. I don't turn to look when I hear her growl. I need to think, but my heart is thundering in my ears, making it hard to concentrate. Then I hear the faintest rustling in the woods. I look up and exhale the breath I'd been holding as he walks out of the trees, silky black hair glistening in the sun. Thank God. "Luc," I say, shaking Taylor off and standing up. I take a step forward, but then he lifts his head.

"Hi Frannie," he says with a wicked gleam in his glowing red eyes. "I'm Belias."

I look at him and know I should run, but my feet seem rooted to the ground, and I'm feeling a little dizzy all of a sudden. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Taylor slink off up the path.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since the night we met in front of your house." His voice is velvet, and I feel my legs go soft. He steps slowly forward till he's right in front of me. He touches my face and traces a burning path across my cheekbone. "Everything is fine, Frannie. It's going to be great." His hot hands slide around my waist, pulling me to his burning body.

The black fog permeates my brain as I melt into him. He feels like Luc, and I can't help but lose myself in his touch. When his lips touch mine I can barely breathe. My hands slide around him and I press into the curve of his body, but then some little corner of my mind screams, "No." I pull a deep breath and try to think. Almost instinctively, my hand gravitates to the cross dangling from my neck as I fight to hold on to my remaining shred of conscious thought. With my last scrap of free will, I pull back from his kiss, look up at him, and smile.

Then I yank the cross from my neck and jam it into his eye.

A bestial roar shakes the woods as he drops to his knees, clawing at his bubbling face. He shimmers for a second, almost like a mirage, as something terrifying peeks out from under his skin.

The smell of rotten eggs instantly clears my head. I turn and run full speed up the path without looking back. I don't know what the

hell I'm gonna do when I get to the car. Is there a car? Were Riley and Taylor ever really here? I don't know what's real.

I'm trying not to cry, a useless effort, since I'm pretty much crying anyway, and everything is a green blur as I stumble up the path, so I don't see Taylor lying there till I trip over her and launch face first into the dirt. As I scramble to my feet, I hear something moving through the woods toward us. Belias. Damn!

I grab Taylor under the arms and drag her, but we're moving too slowly and he catches us. I prop her against a tree and step in front of her, crouching into judo stance, as he bursts out of the woods and onto the path.

"Frannie! Thank God!" Luc grabs Taylor and throws her over his shoulder. "Let's go!" He pushes me in front of him as we run up the path, and when we get to the road he throws Taylor into the backseat of the Shelby with Riley, who's lying there unconscious.

We climb into the car and slam the doors.

"Jesus, Luc! What…" But then I remember.

Belias! He was in a Black '68 Shelby Cobra that night. This isn't Luc.

My heart stops. "Oh, shit!"

"What is it, Frannie? Are you okay?" The Shelby fishtails as he guns the engine, sending gravel flying up behind us.

I look in the backseat at Taylor and Riley, then back at Belias. What do I do? I breathe and try to think. And when I look back at the road there's a tall, raven-haired girl standing in the middle of it. The girl from Luc's bed. "Oh, shit!" I say again.

I expect Belias to slow down, but instead he stares out the windshield, determined, and speeds up. I bring my arms up, expecting her to come crashing through the windshield, but instead she evaporates. Poof-gone.

When we get near the main road, I grab the steering wheel and yank. The car swerves to the right, nearly swiping a tree before Belias yanks the wheel back and brings the car up onto the dirt road.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

"Go to Hell!" I yell and try to grab the wheel again, but he pushes me back.

"Frannie, please! Stop trying to kill us, will you?"

I look in his eyes. God, he looks just like Luc. And then it hits me… what he said when he found us on the path. He said, "Thank God." Would Belias say that? Would Luc?

"Luc?"

"Who were you expecting?" The rasp from the backseat makes me jump, and the smell of rotten eggs chokes me.

I turn to see the real Belias-I think. But he doesn't look like Luc

anymore. There's no mistaking what he is: steaming, crimson skin, flat, pinched face, and horns, with one clawed hand around each of my best friends' necks. But what gives him away as Belias is the black ooze dripping from where his left eye once was.

Luc slams on the breaks and I nearly slide onto the floor. Then he turns and points a glowing fist at Belias.

"Do you really want to do that?" Belias says, shaking Riley and Taylor's unconscious bodies. "Course, Frannie didn't come out all that worse for wear, did she?" A grimace pulls at his leathery lips, exposing a mouthful of fangs. "Go ahead. Give it a shot."

"Luc?" Frannie says, urging me with her eyes.

"I can't," I say, dropping my fist. "He's right. If he doesn't shield them it would kill them."

"Good boy," Belias smirks.

"What do you want?" I say.

He coughs out a rasping chuckle. "You have to ask? I thought you were smarter than that, being a First Level and all."

Unholy Hell.

I look back at Riley and Taylor. Can I sacrifice them for Frannie? My head says yes, but my annoying new conscience tells me it's wrong. Plus, if we survive this, Frannie would never forgive me.

"So how is this supposed to work?" I ask past the lump in my throat.

"Frannie gets out of the car," Belias says, gesturing to the side of the car, where Avaira is now standing, a scowl gracing her flawless face, "and she and I have a little party in the woods," he finishes with a heinous grin.

I look at Frannie as she reaches for the door handle, the tangy citrus scent of her terror replaced with the spicy-sweet of clove and currant-her soul, ready for the taking. My hand shoots out involuntarily and grabs her wrist. She tries to pull away, but I shake my head, pleading with my eyes.

"There's no choice, Luc," she says, her expression calm, resigned.

She tugs her arm away and I let her, my mind racing. Pushing open the door, she looks back at me one last time before climbing out and standing next to Avaira. With a burst of brimstone, Belias is standing next to her, slamming Frannie's door.

I pull slowly forward and watch in the rearview mirror as Belias takes Frannie's wrist and starts to drag her across the road, toward the woods. As he moves, I can see he's weak. The crucifix did more damage than he let on. He shouldn't need Avaira, but she's following behind for backup, her glowing fist targeting the back of the Shelby.

And then I drop the Shelby into reverse and floor it, sending Riley and Taylor to the floor in the backseat. I duck as Avaira's blast takes out the back window. Belias drops Frannie's wrist and lifts his fist just as I slam into him at full speed. He goes careening over the car and onto the dirt road in front of me, but I don't wait to see if he stays down. I throw it into first and push open the passenger door, slowing as I reach Frannie. She throws herself into the seat, and I floor it, door still open, running over Belias on our way to the main road.

She pulls herself the rest of the way into the car, slams the door,

and looks out the shattered back window at the lump in the dirt-Belias. Avaira is nowhere in sight. "Is he… dead?"

"Unfortunately, it'd take a lot more than a 1968 Shelby Cobra to kill him, but he'll feel it for a while." I can hear the shake in my voice. "Truth is, your crucifix to his eye probably did more long-term damage. That's going to set him back a bit." I grab her hand. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," she says, checking herself over as we pull out onto the main road.

I feel her shake as I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her close. This is as far from me as she's ever going to get.

19

Dance with the Devil

LUC

Frannie straightens Riley's legs and sits next to her friends on my bed. "Are they gonna be okay?"

"Yeah. It'll take a little while for them to come around. Demon possession can knock the Hell out of you."

"You can just jump into other people's bodies whenever you want?"

I nearly gag thinking about it, but then I remember being in Frannie-how incredible it was. "If they're tagged for Heaven they're off limits, but otherwise, yeah. It's usually pretty uncomfortable. It's cramped… and sort of sticky and slimy."

"How does it work? Are you, like, both in there at the same time?"

"Pretty much. It takes a very strong mortal to hold his own against a demon who is trying to control him, so it's usually like the mortal's not even there, aside from taking up space. But it's not always like that." I think about dancing with Frannie again and feel a tingle work through me, making me shudder.

She looks at Taylor and Riley on the bed. "Will they remember anything about Belias and Avaira?"

"Probably not. When a mortal is possessed it's almost like they go dormant. They won't remember, and it's probably best if they don't know what happened."

She stands up, meanders over, and wraps her arms around me. "How did you know?"

And that's the problem. I didn't until it was almost too late. I shake my head. "My sixth sense was buzzing when we got out of the car. It never occurred to me that Belias and Avaira would resort to possession. I figured when you left with Taylor and Riley, Belias would make a move to follow and I could take him down. But as soon as you pulled out of the parking lot, the buzz stopped. I'm embarrassed to say it took me a few minutes to figure it out, and, when I did, it was almost too late. I knew which direction you went… and then I remembered the quarry. Belias was there that night."

"What does he want with me?"

"The same thing I did." My heart aches. I know how hard this is

for her to hear. But she needs to understand that they won't give up until she's tagged-one way or the other. "They'll keep coming for you."

She stiffens. "I hate this. Why is this happening to me?"

I hold her tighter. "I don't know," I say, wishing I did.

She sighs and presses her face into my chest. "So it's always going to be like this." A tear slips over her lashes, and I wipe it away. "I just want a normal life."

I want to hold her and tell her it's all going to be okay, but I'm not going to lie to Frannie anymore. "I think you gave up normal when you fell for a demon." And maybe an angel. The thought sits like a stone in my core, weighing me down. I kiss the top of her head and sigh, "But I don't see them stopping until they have you."

"There's nothing we can do?"

"We can try running, but I'm not sure there's anywhere we could go that they wouldn't find us."

Her expression is suddenly determined. "I'm going to live my life. Otherwise what's the point of fighting? I may as well just let them tag me now."

I pull her closer, wishing it could be that easy. "There's your Sway, Frannie."

"What do you mean?"

"Your Sway. If it's strong enough to change me, you should at least be able to use it to defend yourself."

"How does it work?"

"That's something you'll have to figure out for yourself, but once you learn to control it, it should be some protection."

She looks up at me, and I see the fear and trepidation in her eyes. "What was Belias gonna do?"

"Belias is a creature of lust, an incubus, so his technique usually involves seduction and soul sucking. But that's only with mortals who are already tagged-I think." I remember my conversation with Belias under Frannie's tree. "He did say the rules were changing…" I feel her shudder in my arms.

"This sucks," she says, looking back at Riley and Taylor on the bed.

And just then, Taylor's eyes snap open. Taylor gasps and sits up. "What the hell…?"

"Hey, Tay," Frannie says, walking over and sitting next to her. Riley groans and opens her eyes, still looking groggy.

"What's going on?" Taylor checks her clothes and looks around suspiciously.

"Just hanging out," I say with a little push.

Riley sits up, still dazed.

"Hey, Ry. How you feeling?" Frannie says.

"Like shit," she answers.

Taylor swings around and stares at me. "Where the hell are we?"

"Welcome to my humble abode," I say through a smile with another push. "Don't you remember coming up?"

Her eyes glaze over a little. "Maybe…"

"You want another beer?" I head for the fridge.

"No!" Riley practically shouts, rubbing her forehead.

We get Taylor and Riley loaded into Riley's car, which Frannie and I circled back to retrieve, and watch as they pull out. I look around and sigh in relief, thinking about how close that was-for all of us. I loop my arm protectively around Frannie as I steer her back up the stairs to my apartment. Once inside, she latches all the deadbolts and locks while I throw up a field, my own infernal deterrent. Then she drapes herself over me, and I feel my heart speed up. She's still shaking a little… or is that me? I'm not sure. "You okay?" I whisper in her ear.

She presses into me. "I am now," she says. Then she's looking up at me with curious eyes. "So, what you said earlier… about being able to be in other people's bodies…"

"Yeah…"

"I was kind of wondering… could you… you know, do that with me?"

I look at the floor, feeling more than a little guilty, and watch the toe of my boot scuff at one of the filthy linoleum daisies. "I have."

I'm surprised when I look up and find her smiling. "When?"

"Just before I first kissed you."

"You mean before I first kissed you."

I crack a wide smile. "Actually, I kissed you first. You just slept through it."

She laughs. "Could you do it again? I mean the thing where you're inside me. I promise I'll stay awake."

My heart takes off. But as I fantasize about slipping through Frannie's lips, being in there with her again, I realize that I might not be able to do it anymore. Things are changing fast. "I'm not sure."

She stretches up onto her tiptoes and kisses me, then gazes into my depths and whispers, "Try."

I kiss her again, pulling her to me as tightly as I can, and as her lips part, I let my essence flow through them. I'm surprised again at how effortless it feels-because she's inviting me in, I'm sure. I feel that same overwhelming rush of sensations I felt the first time, many of which I now have names for. Love, for sure, but also joy, hope, and pure awe for her sheer beauty. She's more beautiful on the inside, and that's saying something. We dance-and I'm in Heaven.

I leave just enough of myself behind to control my body, and as I hold her on the outside, I caress her on the inside, drinking in her gasps and moans as I explore her, inside and out. I feel her body's physical reaction-not to mention my own. Before I know it, we're on the bed, shirts on the floor, and it takes everything I have to stop. My heart aches as I reluctantly pull my essence back, and I'm left with that same feeling of being empty and alone in my human shell.

She sits up on the bed and huffs. "Why'd you stop?"

"A knowing act of lust with a demon will earn you a one-way ticket straight to the Abyss. I'm sure of it. We can't do this until I know it's safe for you."

"They… you… you're taking everything. My life… everything. This is all I want. Just this one thing. Please? You're almost human."

"I don't know that. It seems to be the direction I'm headed… and I really want to… obviously." God, how I want to. "But just the fact that I can still do… that," I shudder, "means it's not safe yet."

She flings herself back into the pillows and blows her unruly tresses out of her face. "This bites."

I shift up onto my elbow and kiss her. "You're the only one who's ever known who I am, who I'm not, and who I want to be. And somehow you love me anyway. I'm not taking any chances with you, Frannie."

She rolls on her side and gazes into my eyes. A wicked little smile just curls the corners of her pouting lips. "That was amazing," she says, tracing the lines of my cheekbone with the tip of her index finger and making me shudder. Then her smile widens. "Probably better than sex anyway."

I smile back, dying to prove her wrong. It was amazing. Mind-blowing, actually. But I can't imagine sex with Frannie would be anything less. "How much do you remember?"

Her smile widens and she trails a finger down my chest to the button of my jeans. "All of it."

I can't stop my own smile. "Interesting."

Her finger trails along my stomach at the waistband of my jeans, driving me insane, and I'm right on the edge of diving back into her when she says, "Where is Hell, anyway?"

I almost laugh. "At the core."

She looks into my face, surprised. "Of the Earth?"

"Yep."

"So all those kids digging to China are in for one hell of a surprise."

"Literally," I chuckle.

"How did you get there? Did someone like you come after you?"

"No. I'm a creature of Hell." I shoot a sideways glance at her, not

sure how she'll take that, but she just looks thoughtful.

"What do you mean?"

"Demons are created in Hell. We were never human."

"I don't get how that works."

"We're born from sin. My sin is pride, just like the original-King Lucifer. My name is a dead giveaway. Only creatures of pride are arrogant enough to take His name."

Her eyes shift to her hand on my chest. "Would it be really weird if I said I think I kinda knew all along?"

I smile. "Yes."

Her eyes flit to mine and away. She opens her mouth to say something then closes it again.

My smile widens. I lift her chin with a finger and fix her in my gaze. "What?"

She blushes and her face pulls into an embarrassed grimace. "Nothing," she says, lowering her lashes.

"It's obviously something."

"I want to feel your horns," she blurts without looking at me.

I grimace. "Why?"

She rolls with her back to me. "Forget it. It's stupid."

I roll her back and shift onto my elbows above her. "You're not going to run screaming from the room?"

She lifts her eyes to mine, then lifts her head and kisses me. "After what you just did? What do you think?"

I close my eyes and push off my human shell and shudder when I feel Frannie's fingers running slowly through my hair. There's a tremble in her touch as she traces one finger around the base of my left horn, then up to the tip and back. I feel both of her hands wrap around them as she pulls me down into a kiss, and they vanish as I sink back into her.

When I pull back, I stare down into those sapphire eyes looking for any sign of fear or disgust, but all I see is love. I still can't believe that look is directed at me.

"Will they try that again… with Taylor and Riley, I mean?"

I sigh and trail my finger down her nose, over her lips, down her chin and along her neck, stopping short of that insanely hot red bra. "Probably not. They know we'll be looking for it."

"What are we gonna do?"

I roll off her and shake my head. "I don't know. My sixth sense is slipping. This is dangerous, Frannie. I can't see them coming like I used to. I'm not sure I can protect you anymore."

She smiles. "I need another cross, and I think you need a talisman. Something to ward off evil spirits."

"And just where am I going to get this talisman?"

If I didn't know better, I'd swear her eyes were glowing. She sits up and turns her back to me, undoing the clasp of her bra and sliding it off. As I watch, I feel things… stirring… and it's taking every ounce of restraint I can muster not to jump her right this second. She pulls a pillow in front of her and turns back, her hair spilling across one side of her face. She tosses her bra to me with a sinful grin that would put any demon to shame.

"Your talisman," she says.

"If you think this is going to ward off evil spirits," I say, holding it up, "then you don't know much about evil spirits." I look at her and work to control my breathing. "You have no idea what you're doing to me." Truth is, I have no idea what she's doing to me either. This is completely uncharted territory. But, whatever it is, I think I like it.

Still grinning wickedly, she says, "I'm not sorry."

But then I see it. The answer. I hesitate for just a second, letting my eyes eat Frannie alive, before hanging her bra on my headboard and tossing her shirt to her. "As much as it pains me to say it, you have to get dressed. Gabriel has something we need."

FRANNIE

"I'm not going to let him tag me," I say on the way to Gabriel's house.

"I wish you would. That'd be the surest way. But there are other things that might be almost as good."

"Like what?"

"Being a Dominion, he's privy to information I'm not. He's also got power I can only dream of."

I think about our kiss-how it made me feel-and raise my hand to my lips and sigh.

"What's going on with you two?" Luc's voice is soft, but with an edge.

"Nothing." I think.

"You're a terrible liar."

"I'm not-" lying, I start to say. But I am. 'Cause there is something going on. I just have no idea what it is. "I kissed him."

Luc slams on the brakes, skidding to the side of the road. "You what?"

"I kissed him."

He just stares at me, rage storming in his eyes. "When?"

"Before us-mostly," I say.

"Mostly? What's mostly?"

And his rage triggers my own. "You know what? It's none of your business. At least he wasn't nearly naked in my goddamn bed! And I'm still not convinced you weren't doing Avaira!"

His jaw clenches and his eyes narrow. "Did he kiss you back?"

I slide down in the seat and cross my arms tight across my chest to keep from hitting him. "I told you, it's none of your business."

"Well this is just rich," he says, his voice acid, "not only are you bringing down demons, but Dominions too." He pulls back up onto the road and stares blindly out the windshield. "So, do you want him? Because whatever you want, you can pretty much have, what with the whole Sway thing."

I glare at him. "Just take me home."

I keep my arms wrapped tightly around me. The ache in my chest threatens to dissolve into angry tears, but I force myself not to cry. I won't give him the satisfaction.

He pulls over on the side of the road again and just sits there, staring straight ahead-forever.

"I can walk from here," I finally say, reaching for the door handle.

"Stop." His hand darts out and grasps my wrist.

I jerk my arm away. "Let go!" But when I turn to look at him, his

face is soft and his eyes are deep.

"Frannie, please try to remember that I'm new at this. I've still got feelings-emotions-raging through me that I can't even begin to identify. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with them. I didn't mean what I said. I'm sorry."

I fight against the tears again. I really want to be mad at him. I want to hate him, 'cause it feels safer than loving him.

I tug on the door handle. "Too late." I step out of the car, but before I get ten feet, he's there, wrapping his arms around me from behind.

"Let go of me!"

A passing car slows and pulls onto the shoulder just as I pull Luc's arm off me and throw him over my shoulder onto the ground. A tall, skinny man about my dad's age gets out and looks at me with wide eyes. "Do you need help, miss?"

I look down at Luc, and, for a second, I'm madder, 'cause he's laughing.

"You think it's funny?" I sneer. But then I realize how ridiculous we must look, and there's no stopping the stupid smile that pulls at my lips.

"Miss?" the guy says, taking a cautious step toward us.

Luc pulls himself off the ground as I break into an uncontrollable giggle. He looks at the guy. "We're fine…" his gaze shifts back to me, "I think."

I can't stop laughing, but I nod.

The guy doesn't look sure, so I work really hard to stop giggling. "Thank you, but I'm okay."

He eyes Luc warily. "If you're sure."

I clear my throat and try to look serious. "I'm sure."

As he climbs back in his car and pulls away, I feel Luc's arms snake around my waist and pull my body into his. "Are you done beating me up?" Luc says into my hair, and I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Maybe." I spin in his arms and wipe a smudge of dirt off his cheek. "Are you done pissing me off?"

He grins. "Maybe."

He grabs my hand and tows me back to the car. But as we pull away, something he said hits me hard, like a fist to the gut, and I feel suddenly sick.

"Do you think I cheated?"

He loops his arm over my shoulders. "What?"

"You just said I could pretty much have whatever I wanted. Did I make you love me?"

He turns and looks into my eyes, a bemused smile on his perfect

lips. "You did."

"No, I mean did I make you love me. Like, you didn't really want to but my… influence-this Sway thing or whatever it is that Gabe thinks I can do-like, made you."

"That's irrelevant."

"Not to me."

"Frannie, what matters is that what I feel is real and genuine. I wouldn't want to go back to what I was. How I got here doesn't matter, just that I'm here."

"That's just stupid. That's like saying I beat you in poker 'cause I stacked the deck, but you're glad I have all your money."

"If you took my money and bought me paradise with it, I would be glad you had it. And that's what you've done." He reaches for me and draws me to his shoulder. I shove him away and look out the window as he pulls back out into the road. I feel his eyes on me, but I can't look at him, knowing what I've done. I've given a whole new meaning to the term "mind games." But more, in some selfish little corner of my mind, I hate that he didn't fall in love with me. He was pushed. He doesn't love me for me. He loves me 'cause he had no choice.

LUC

Frannie's sitting on the arm of a chair, staring out the window, and Gabriel is sitting on his couch looking at me like I'm nuts. "The Shield only works for angels and some mortals. Last I looked, dude, you're no angel."

"What do you mean, 'some mortals'?"

"Well, Adam and Lilith were the first we tried it on, and you know how well that went. But there have been others where it's worked." He shrugs. "Go figure."

"You mean Eve-Adam and Eve," Frannie says to the window.

Gabriel cocks half a smile. "You're right, it didn't work on Eve either, but Lilith was Adam's first wife."

She turns and looks at him, then at me, as if hoping I'll confirm that Gabriel has lost his mind. I shake my head. "Long story." Then I turn back to Gabriel. "Why didn't the Shield work on Frannie?"

Gabriel glares at me. "It did. Until you showed up."

"Oh."

"What didn't work on me? What's this Shield?"

Gabriel answers. "It's essentially a shield against detection by evil. It hides you from all things infernal."

Hope sparks in her eyes. "Could it hide me from angels too?"

A sad smile flits across Gabriel's lips. "No."

She looks dejected again as she asks, "Why didn't it work on me?"

"I don't know. Sometimes it partially works. It only takes one demon who's particularly sensitive to you, for any reason…" He shoots a glance at me.

She looks at me, uncertainty in her eyes. "So you're saying, even with this Shield, Luc found me anyway."

"Looks that way," Gabriel says, but her eyes stay locked on mine.

I nod reassuringly at her and smile. She's so afraid she manipulated me into loving her. It hurts that she can't see how much more it is now. How big it is. It may have been her Sway that started the ball rolling, but the way she makes me feel… that's not her Sway. It's just her.

Her gaze shifts to Gabriel. "Try it on me again."

"You're still under the protection of the Shield. I think that's why Lucifer is the only one who's found you so far."

I frown. "And Belias and Avaira."

Gabriel's eyes shoot to me. "What are you talking about?"

"Your radar sucks. They've been here for a few weeks."

His surprise turns to antipathy. "You should have told me, but I'm sure Belias found you, loser. You're like an infernal lightning rod.

You're still bound to them, and that psychic thread will be hard to sever."

I can think of one way to sever it right now. "Which brings me back to my original request."

Gabriel eyes me warily. "I've never heard of anyone trying it on a demon. I'm thinking this isn't such a great idea."

"But I'm not a demon anymore, remember?"

"In body, you may be becoming mortal, but in essence you're still theirs-a creature of the Underworld."

I know he's right, because I couldn't have done what I did with Frannie earlier otherwise. "If no one's tried it on a demon, how can you be sure it won't work on me? What's the risk?"

"The risk… well, let's see. There's the risk of death. Forces of light-especially forces this powerful-tend to kill forces of evil. Even if it didn't kill you, it could alter you in ways I can't even guess at."

Frannie stands and steps toward me, her eyes full of concern. "Is somebody gonna tell me what's going on?"

Gabriel looks at her with a sardonic smile. "Lucifer is asking for a miracle."

She rolls her eyes. "Aren't we all? But, really…"

I can't help the smile. "He's serious. That's exactly what I'm asking for."

"A miracle," she says, as if waiting for the punch line.

"Yep."

That obviously wasn't the answer she was hoping for. "Great."

Gabriel laces his fingers in hers and stares into her palm. "The Shield of Light makes angels invisible to detection by forces of evil. Angels can protect a mortal under their Shield when it doesn't work directly on the mortal. That's part of the reason I'm here-to shield you." He looks up at her and she holds his eyes with hers.

Chocolate.

Jealousy bubbles up and I choke it back-for her sake. "Your radar sucks and your Shield must be defective too. I smelled you coming a mile away," I smirk.

Gabriel's eyes stay locked on Frannie's. "I let you detect me. Hoping to scare you off."

A bark of a laugh escapes my chest. "As if!"

"So, what is this Shield? What would Luc have to do?" Frannie asks.

Gabriel pulls his eyes away from Frannie and shoots a cynical look at me. "Grow a halo."

She rolls her eyes again. "Be serious."

We both look at her, dead serious.

"Great," she says again.

Gabriel eyes me skeptically. "It will only work on a pure heart with the purest intentions."

Frannie cracks a smile. "I could have told you that wouldn't work on me."

Gabriel is still staring at me. "It would be dangerous to try on a mortal tagged for Hell, and I think you're a few steps beyond that."

"So… it could kill him?" she says, her smile gone.

"Yes."

"Then he's not doing it."

I look at Frannie, who now is looking at me with wide eyes, a little shell-shocked. My intentions are pure, I know that. My only intention is to save her from a fate she doesn't deserve. But my heart? I'm not so sure. If it's pure, Frannie made it that way. "What do I have to do? How does it work?" I ask, knowing I have to try. If I can't protect Frannie, I'm useless. Worse than useless. I'm a liability-a beacon for the Underworld.

Gabriel eyes Frannie, probably weighing how she would react if something happened to me at his hands. Fury, vengeance… all sins.

"Gabriel, this is my decision. Not hers," I say, drawing his attention back to me.

His eyes pull away from her and focus on me as he nods.

"Hold up," Frannie says, fiery incredulity all across her face, but fear in her eyes. "You're serious that he could die?"

Concern passes briefly over Gabriel's features. He can't lie…

"That's a risk, because he's still tethered to Hell."

"What do you mean?"

"He's a creature of the Underworld, no matter what he's becoming. His life force is spawned from Hell, and he'll always be connected."

I feel my insides boil as my disgust for what I am starts to feed on me. I can't look at her. I can't handle seeing that same disgust for me mirrored in her eyes.

But when she doesn't respond, I glance in her direction. She looks me in the eye and her expression turns cold. "I don't think you should do this, Luc. Not for me. Because I don't love you. I don't want you anymore."

And even though I know she's lying, the crushing pain in my chest is almost incapacitating. "You don't mean that."

"I do. I don't want someone who loves me 'cause he has to. I want someone who loves me for me." I feel my heart go dead in my chest as she turns to Gabriel. "What needs to happen for you to tag me?"

"You need to forgive yourself."

For the briefest of instants, pain twists her face, but, just as quickly, she smoothes it away. "Forgive myself… for Matt, you mean."

"Yes," Gabriel replies with a sad smile.

Everything in me wants her to be safe-wants Gabriel to protect her. But what I'd never tell her is that, once she's tagged for Heaven, I'm certain things between us will change. Gabriel said it: no matter what I'm becoming, I'm a creature of Hell. Frannie's life, and her priorities, will change once she's tagged for Heaven. She won't want me or need me for long. But she'll be safe.

"Do it, Frannie," I say and turn away. Because, despite my best intention, the pain in my words rang clear.

It's silent for a long moment, and when I turn back, Frannie looks unsure. Lost.

Finally, Gabriel speaks. "As much as I hate to say it, this is the wrong reason. You will forgive yourself eventually, and when that happens, you'll be tagged for Heaven. It's not something you can force, even for him." He spits the last word, and his face twists into something less than angelic.

She looks at me and a tear slips down her cheek. She flings herself into my arms and nearly squeezes the life out of me. "Luc, don't do this. We'll figure something else out." I can feel her heart thrumming against my chest.

I pull back, kiss her, and look at Gabriel. "Let's do it."

"Stop! No!" she yells, squeezing tighter and burying her face in my chest.

"Frannie," Gabriel says in a sweet, soft melody, "Lucifer is right. If you insist on being together we have to try this."

Frannie pulls her face out of my chest and looks up at him. He's glowing again-what a show-off. But it seems to work, because her grip on me loosens. But then I feel her hands on my face, and I can't resist as she pulls me into a kiss.

Gabriel steps in front of me. "Take off your shirt."

I pull it over my head and Frannie takes it from me, hugging it to her face. He lifts his hand to my forehead, and I notice it's wet. Then I'm burning hotter than the Lake of Fire.

Holy water.

Of course this damned Shield of Light would involve holy water. These holier-than-thou types can't seem to accomplish anything without it. I hold my breath-more difficult now than it used to be-and screw my eyes shut against the pain. I feel the skin on my forehead blister and peel where Gabriel marks the circle there. When his hand moves to my chest and leaves a bubbling red handprint over my heart, I hear the groan escape my throat, and it's all I can do to keep from pulling away from his touch and doubling over. I grimace, because I know Gabriel's enjoying this.

Stop being such a goddamn baby and suck it up. This is what you

wanted.

I grit my teeth and am acutely aware of Frannie sobbing, piercing my heart, as she holds my hand in a death grip. Gabriel says some words in an ancient language, but I don't hear them. I don't hear anything but Frannie. She's all that matters.

And then she's in my arms, kissing the raw skin on my chest. I open my eyes and she looks up, tears streaming down her face.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers through her tears.

My pain is lost in her face. I wrap my arms around her and smile. "Why would you say something stupid like that?"

I feel her exhale sharply, the last of her sobs, as she reaches up to touch my blistered forehead. "You're okay?"

"Never better."

I take my shirt from her hand and shudder as her finger trails over the welts on my chest. I slide it on and take her hand, pulling her to the door. "We've got one more stop."

FRANNIE

Grandpa sits across his coffee table from us, in the loveseat, his elbows on his knees, his pipe forgotten in his hand. He looks a little pale, and, for a second, I'm afraid we gave him a heart attack. He glares at Luc, sitting next to me on the couch. "A demon," he repeats for the sixth time. At first he laughed and told us to stop pulling his leg. He's not laughing now.

Luc holds Grandpa's gaze without wavering. "I was. I'm not totally sure what I am now."

"Human," I say. "You're turning human."

Luc shoots me a wary smile.

"How does that work?" Grandpa's voice doesn't boom. He sounds uncharacteristically weak.

"Frannie's… special," Luc says.

Now Grandpa's voice does boom. "I know that! That doesn't explain anything. Why are ya here?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but it explains everything. Frannie has special talents. Power that is invaluable to the Underworld. I came to claim her soul for Hell, but her power is changing me."

Grandpa jumps off of the couch. "Get away from her! Frannie, get over here." He lunges toward us and grabs my arm, pulling me off the couch and around the coffee table. He tucks me under his arm protectively.

"Grandpa, please. Just listen to us."

"I'm hearin' ya loud and clear," he says, glaring at Luc. "Get the hell back to where ya came from. Ya can't have Frannie."

"He doesn't want me!" I blurt and then blush and smile at Luc. "Well, not like that, anyway."

Luc smiles back, but then his expression becomes grave. "Sir, I really need your help."

There's venom I've never heard in Grandpa's voice. "You want me to help you drag my granddaughter to Hell?"

"No, I want you to help me tag her soul for Heaven."

I hear my breath catch, and I squirm out from under Grandpa's arm. "You shit! You said you wanted Grandpa to help hide us."

"You need to figure out how to forgive yourself Frannie. I think your grandfather's the best person to help you do that. This Shield might work, but if it doesn't, Gabriel's the only one who can keep you safe. He loves you, Frannie, and he's got some pull with the Big Guy. He may be able to keep things reasonable for you."

"I want my life, goddamit!"

"What are ya all talking about?" Grandpa looks a mix of

frightened confusion.

"Frannie's soul can't be tagged for Hell if it's already tagged for Heaven. But Frannie can't be tagged for Heaven unless she forgives herself for M-"

"Stop!" I scream. "Just stop! This isn't what I want!"

"But it's what you need," Luc says, gazing deep into my eyes.

"Go to Hell!"

"I will, but I'm not taking you with me."

I'm a huge ball of frustrated anger. I want to kill him for stabbing me in the back. "Get out!"

"Frannie?" In my rage, I'd forgotten Grandpa was here. "Talk to me."

I look at him, and everything is lost in a flood of tears. I hug him and hold on for dear life. He sits on the loveseat, bringing me with him, and I lay my head on his shoulder and cry for what feels like forever. When I lift my head and look around, Luc is gone.

"What did he mean, Frannie? About forgiving yourself?"

The tears well up again, and my throat chokes off. I can't say it, can I? Not to Grandpa. 'Cause if he hates me, it would kill me. But when I look in his eyes and see all his wisdom… "I killed Matt, Grandpa."

He doesn't say anything, but as the tears start to fall again, he pulls me to his chest in a bear hug and I feel safer than I have in ten years. I sink into him, exhausted. When I wake up, he's still holding me. And then we talk… and I tell him everything.

He doesn't say anything for a really long time, and I'm sure I've ruined everything. Now that he knows what a terrible person I am, things will never be the same. But then he looks me hard in the eye. "Sounds like you've been luggin' this load of horse manure around for a long time."

He hates me. I knew it. I feel my chest cave in, like my heart just collapsed.

"Listen, Frannie. I wasn't there and I don't know what happened, but I do know this heart," he pats my back, "and it's a good one. If what ya say is true, it was just a terrible accident."

I shake my head hard, like maybe I can throw off the guilt. "But I was so mad. I… hated him."

"I'm pretty sure ya couldn't hate anything if ya tried, Frannie. Ya don't have it in ya. Sounds to me like what happened just happened. Nobody's fault."

But he's wrong. It was my fault.

"Everybody's got their own crap they carry around with them. I know that firsthand. After your grandma died…" He trails off, shaking his head. He squeezes my shoulders a little tighter. "It's human nature

to blame ourselves when bad stuff happens-to think about what we coulda done so things woulda turned out different."

I see the guilt on his face and it kills me. "What happened to Grandma wasn't your fault, Grandpa." It was mine. I should have tried harder to make Mom come over.

"But that doesn't mean it ain't gonna feel that way." He pulls his arm from around my shoulders and grasps my hand. "You and Matt were closer than most. I don't know what happened in that tree, but no matter what it was, you weren't gonna come out of it okay. But there comes a time when ya gotta see it for what it was: an accident."

I feel the hard ball of cold terror I've carried in my chest for the last ten years soften a little around the edges. Part of what he's saying is true. I didn't mean to kill Matt. So maybe I'm not a monster.

But that doesn't make it any less my fault.

I tuck into his side and sit there for hours more.

20

Speak of the Devil

LUC

For three days I sat on a tree branch outside Frannie's window before she would speak to me again. She had a rough time with finals, but it helps to have friends in high places. With some divine intervention she finished okay.

I wasn't planning on going to graduation. I mean, how many high school diplomas does a guy really need? But then it occurred to me that I may need this one if I'm truly turning mortal.

I'm hiding in the shadows of the scoreboard waiting for Frannie when there's a tap on my shoulder. I turn and find Gabriel, leaning on the goalpost, smirking at me, and it hits me how blind I am without my sixth sense, which is mostly gone.

He flicks the ridiculous maroon graduation gown fluttering around me. "Nice dress."

"Go to Hell."

"Not likely," he says, shrugging away from the post.

I look over at the grandstand as Frannie shows up with her family.

"Why did you…" I glance back at Frannie.

"Back off?" he finishes for me. "Because she made her choice."

"How do you know?"

He smirks at me. "You're joking, right? Look at yourself."

And it hits me. I'm on my way to becoming human-and she did that to me. That's how much she wanted me. What's left of my power surges, and I feel the crackle of hot electricity dance over my skin. "And I suppose you came out unscathed? Still have your wings?"

He smiles. "It was touch and go there for a while."

"If she… if it had gone the other way, would you have given them up?"

His eyes flick to Frannie and back as his smile pulls to one side and his eyebrow quirks. "Would I have had a choice?"

What I see in his eyes-what he's trying to hide behind that amused expression, maybe even from himself-is that he'd willingly give up his wings for her.

He steps behind the scoreboard. "Just because you're no longer a

threat to her soul, don't think I won't be watching. Give me an excuse, and I'll smote you on the spot." And then he disappears-gone, as if he was never there.

I watch from the football field as Frannie's mom fusses with her hair and cap. Only Frannie could make these ridiculous caps and gowns look so hot. I'm imagining what she's got on underneath-and underneath that. Hopefully I'll have a chance to find out later. I already know it's not her red bra. Maybe something black… and lacy…

She comes out onto the field with Riley and Taylor as her family makes their way onto the bleachers, and I laugh out loud at the look on her dad's face when she walks over and kisses me. And then I see Grandpa staring at me, his expression stern. But just as I'm about to look away, he smiles and nods in my direction.

Frannie looks up into the stands at her father. "We're gonna have to do something about that."

"I think it's a lost cause," I say, hoping I'm wrong. I pull her close and kiss her again.

"You guys make me sick. Get a room," Taylor sneers.

Riley grabs Taylor's hand and starts pulling her toward the gym. "They're lining up. Let's go."

I loop my arm around Frannie, shooting a glance at her father, and we wind our way through the sea of maroon caps and gowns to the line forming behind the gym.

The music starts and all the good little lemmings walk in double file. They told us to stay two feet apart, but Frannie wraps her arm around me and pulls her body to mine as we start up the football field to our seats. I can't wipe the grin off my face.

We sit, and I look around at all the sweaty bodies baking in the sun as Principal Grayson drones on about new beginnings and other such nonsense. About thirty minutes in, I realize why I've always avoided these graduation ceremonies like a plague of rats.

Just when I'm convinced that after seven millennia I'm going to die right here of boredom, they start calling names and our row stands. I walk across the platform, and Principal Grayson hands me my diploma with a grin and a sage nod. I wait at the bottom of the stairs for Frannie, and as she walks toward me, her gown blowing back in the breeze, outlining those curves, I can't help but fantasize about later. She's supposed to be staying at Taylor's tonight. I wonder if she could be talked into a change of venue. She gets to the bottom of the stairs, and I lift her off the ground and kiss her.

As I lower her back to her feet she says, "Mmm, nice. That's gonna score you some points with the parents."

I look into the stands and see her parents standing there, slack-

jawed, Dad with a camera perched, forgotten, in his hand. And Grandpa is laughing. "So what's the plan?"

"I'm working on it. But I'm pretty sure it doesn't include molesting me in front of them."

Frannie's family comes down to the field after the ceremony, her dad still glaring.

"So," her mom says, "you're going to the party with Taylor and Riley?" She's trying to be cheerful, but her smile is as fake as cubic zirconia.

Frannie rolls her eyes. "Yes, Mom."

Frannie's grandpa meanders over and pats me on the back. "Luc will take good care of her. We have an agreement. Don't we, son."

I smile, relieved. "Yes, sir."

"I think Frannie's in good hands," he says, winking at me.

Frannie's mom's fake smile can't hold, and she glowers at Grandpa. "Dad, really. This isn't your affair."

"No, you're right. It's Frannie's," he says and winks at Frannie this time.

Frannie speaks up. "I told you. I'm going to the party with Taylor and Riley, Mom. You know our deal. And don't forget, Riley and I are staying at Taylor's tonight."

She eyes me suspiciously, and I can see Frannie's dad ready to protest, just as Taylor and Riley appear and grab Frannie.

"Hey Mrs. Cavanaugh," Taylor says. "So, I'm kidnapping Frannie, 'kay?"

Frannie's dad's eyes soften a little, and her mom says, "All right. But I want you girls to stay together." Her eyes flick to me and back to Frannie. "All night."

Then Taylor looks at Frannie's dad. Her whole face softens, and it almost looks like she's going to cry. "Thanks, Mr. Cavanaugh. Dad's pretty excited about starting his new job. He really appreciates your help finding it."

"You're welcome. It's the least I could do. I'm glad he's feeling better."

"The counselor is really helping all of us," she says. She hesitates, then steps forward and wraps Mr. Cavanaugh in a hug. Once his surprise clears, he lifts his hand and pats her back.

"I'm happy that I could help," he says.

She pulls away and for the first time ever, I notice color in her cheeks. Then the Tayloresque gleam returns to her eye. She hooks her arms around Frannie and Riley. "Let's go, girls. We have some serious partying to do."

Frannie hugs her family, and I hold out my hand to Frannie's

grandpa. He shakes it and then I shift it to Mr. Cavanaugh. He hesitates but then reaches for my hand. As he shakes it he gives it a very firm squeeze-a warning.

"Have a good evening," I say to all of them with my most reassuring smile and a tip of my head. I turn to walk with Frannie, Taylor, and Riley to the parking lot.

And my heart stops.

Avaira.

She's standing with her back to us, her long, straight, raven hair glistening in the bright June sun. I pull Frannie behind me and feel my diminishing power crackle over the surface of my balled right fist. Avaira turns slowly and I raise my fist, then I release the breath I'd been holding as my heart resumes a rhythm.

It's not her.

I'm paranoid, seeing Belias and Avaira everywhere. Because I'm sure they're still here-and desperate. They have to know that time is running out.

I wrap my arm around Frannie, who looks startled, and my heart rate settles back to normal as we make our way to Riley's car. Frannie curls herself around me. She peers over her shoulder at her friends, who are busy pulling off each other's caps and bobby pins, and whispers, "What was that all about?"

I just shake my head.

Her eyes narrow, but she lets it go as her friends approach. "So, I'll see you there?"

"Wouldn't miss it. How long are you guys going to need?"

She, Riley, and Taylor share a shrug. "We're just going to Taylor's to change, and we'll head right up to Gallaghers'. So, like, a half hour maybe?"

I kiss her again. "See you there," I say, knowing-as usual-that I'm not going to let her out of my sight. I never do, but she doesn't need to know that. No sense stressing her out more than she already is. I'll do anything to help her feel like her life is normal-at times, anyway.

FRANNIE

He thinks I don't know he's following me all the time. He knows I want my life, and he's trying so hard to let me have it. I don't want to burst his bubble, so I don't say anything, but, really, I like knowing that he's there. When I can't sleep at night, I stare out my window through the trees at the glint of the moonlight off the hood of the Shelby, and wish I was out there with him.

I look around Gallaghers' backyard through beer-blurry eyes and see him leaning against a tree looking hotter than hell. Just as I start stumbling toward him, Riley and Trevor come sneaking out of the woods. I change my direction, staggering up to her, and brush the bramble out of her hair with my fingers as Trevor makes his way back up the stairs to his crew on the porch. I crack a smile. "Hey, Ry. You guys spending some quality time in Gallaghers' shed?"

Even in the bit of moonlight filtering through the trees, I can tell her blush is flaming. And I recognize the look in her eye, 'cause I've been seeing it in the mirror recently. "He's unbelievable, Fee. The stuff he does with his-"

I hold up my hand. "Too much information, Ry." But then I can't stop the grin from spreading across my face. It's great to see her so happy. "When you guys gonna tell Taylor?"

"Trevor's going to talk to her tomorrow-I think. He said that yesterday too, though… and last week."

I crack up. "She's gonna beat the shit out of him, and he knows it. I think you're gonna have to do it."

She groans as Taylor blasts into us, screaming, nearly knocking me to the ground. Taylor wobbles nearly to the point of falling, and Riley catches her and steadies her on her feet. "Come party with me, losers." Taylor giggles and loops an arm around each of our shoulders.

"Hey Trev!" I yell. "C'mere!"

He looks over warily, then slowly, and with much trepidation, starts making his way down the stairs. When he finally reaches us, I loop my free hand over his shoulder.

"So, Tay, Riley and Trevor have something they're dying to share with you," I say, slipping out from under Taylor's and Trevor's arms and linking them together.

If Taylor didn't need the support, she would have pushed her brother's arm off, but instead she leans on him. "What?"

I watch as Riley and Trevor share a glance then link their free arms around each other, closing the circle.

I turn my back on the happy little circle and look around again.

Roadkill is set up behind the house, and Delanie is blasting out a

perfect Paramore. It's pretty amazing how much better they sound with someone who can actually sing. Reefer looks up at me and smiles. I wave and smile back. I laugh when I think about what Taylor called him: a geek of the Guitar Hero variety. He is, and it's cool.

And suddenly I feel all emotional. It must be the beer, 'cause my eyes well up when I realize how much I'm gonna miss all this. But I hope I'm not gonna miss Luc. I've been afraid to ask what's gonna happen after graduation.

I stumble toward him and stop to look back at my friends when I hear Taylor screech, "You stupid shit!" She shoves Riley, but only succeeds in knocking herself on her butt in the mud.

I turn back, smiling, and make my way to Luc. When I get to him, I hook my hands over his shoulders and lean in to steady myself. I rest my head on his chest, and he wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me close.

"Hey," I say into his shirt.

"You having fun?"

"Yeah, but you're not."

"Why would you think that?"

"Dunno. You're just standing here."

"Enjoying the view," he says squeezing me a little tighter.

"Fee! You suck!" Taylor shouts at me.

In answer, I push back from Luc and flip her the bird. Then I reach up and twist my hand in his hair, pulling his face to mine. He grins and lets me, and when he kisses me I seriously want to climb right into him.

"C'mere," I whisper in his ear, sliding my hand under his T-shirt and running my finger along the skin at his waistband. I want him alone-now.

"Where are we going?" I feel his body stiffen as I hook my fingers around the button of his jeans.

"Just for a little stroll." I turn and start to tug him by the waist of his pants toward his car.

He smiles. "What about your friends? This may be your last bash with them."

"To hell with my friends."

I tow him past a line of cars on the side of the road to the Shelby parked near the woods. When we get to it, I push him into the side and lean in, pressing myself into him. Roadkill must be on a break, 'cause I can hear Led Zeppelin wailing from the boom box about a stairway to Heaven, but all I care about is Luc.

"What did you have in mind?" he asks, searching my face as if looking for something he lost.

"Finding our own stairway to Heaven. Your backseat looks

comfortable. I haven't had a chance to check it out yet," I slur, pushing away from him to open the door.

So, I'm feeling pretty dizzy, but the potent smell of rotten eggs cuts through my drunken haze instantly. I start to turn, but a pair of hot arms grab me from behind. Reflexively, I drop into a crouch and grab one of the arms from my waist. I lose my balance as I flip the person it's attached to over my shoulder onto the ground in front of me. I see his face just before I fall backward into the mud.

Belias's one good eye stares red death at me. His other is covered with a black eye patch.

The next second, I'm being scooped off the ground and thrown into Luc's car.

LUC

I scoop Frannie off the ground and throw her in the car as Belias picks himself up and dives at us. I summon what's left of my power and hit him in the chest with a blast so pathetic it would have embarrassed me a few weeks ago. Now, I'm pretty proud of it. It knocks him back to the ground, slowing him down enough that we're in the car before he picks himself back up. Remembering last time, I throw up a field around the car-probably not enough to keep him out, but it's all I've got-and gun the engine.

But when I look in the rearview mirror, there's a bright flash of white light and someone is standing over Belias. Gabriel? It has to be. But he looks different-smaller, somehow.

I breathe deep to slow my pounding heart. "Are you okay, Frannie?"

"Yup," she says, and when I glance at her, she doesn't even look scared.

"You're sure?"

She actually smiles. "Yup." Then her head lolls back on the seat and she closes her eyes.

"Frannie?" I nudge her.

Nothing.

"Oh, for the sin of Satan," I mumble to myself.

Now what? I can't take her home like this-drunk and covered in mud. There's my apartment… but it's not safe. I need backup. So there's really only one option. Hopefully he'll beat us home.

When Gabriel opens his door and looks at Frannie, wrapped in a blanket in my arms, his eyes widen and his mouth drops open. "She's not…"

"She's fine, don't freak. She just doesn't hold her beer very well."

"I think you're way past having to get her drunk."

"Out of the way, smart-ass," I push past him into the family room.

"Watch the white… everything," he says. "What did she do, mud wrestle?"

I lay her on the couch. "Close. Can't you just throw some holy water on her and clean her up?"

He smirks at me. "Some things do require a miracle. This, however, only requires Tide with bleach. Take off her clothes, and I'll throw them in the machine."

"I'm thinking the miracle is the better option. I'm finding these teenage hormones a force to be reckoned with." I look at Frannie and shake my head. "Truth is, they're kicking my ass."

His mouth curves into a smile far from angelic and his brows

shoot up. "I'll do it." He bends over her and pulls off her muddy sneakers. I shove him out of the way. "Wait in the kitchen."

He shrugs and saunters off in that direction, wicked smile still in place. When he's gone, I tug her shirt over her head and groan.

Damn! I was right-black lace. What a waste.

Once her jeans are off, I tuck the blanket around her and toss her clothes at Gabe. I drop into the chair next to the couch and close my eyes, letting my head loll back. When he comes back, he sits in the chair across from me.

"Thanks for the help," I say looking at Frannie. "I couldn't take her home like this. Her parents already know I'm the devil, and, now that I'm not anymore, I'm hoping to prove them wrong." I wave in her direction. "This won't help my cause."

"Is she supposed to go home tonight?" he asks.

"No. She's supposed to stay at Taylor's."

"We can let her sleep it off here, then."

I swallow my pride. "Also… thanks for the help at the party tonight. I'm not the demon I used to be. There's not much left in the old spark plugs."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know, Belias… at the party."

"Wasn't me, dude."

"Whatever you say. But thanks."

He shakes his head and smiles.

I gaze at Frannie's sleeping form, so petite, on the couch. "Gabriel?"

"Yeah."

"Her soul is still clean, isn't it? I haven't… you know… tainted her or anything? I can't tell for sure anymore."

Concern passes briefly over his features before it clears and he answers, "They have no claim to her, if that's what you're asking. But I'm not sure how long that will last if she keeps hanging with you. You're a bad influence."

"I'm sure I am. So, should I expect to be smote anytime soon? You know, the wrath of God and all that?"

A smile plays at his lips. "Unfortunately, no, but it'd help if you backed off."

I know he's right. I've always known it, but… "I don't seem to have any choice in the matter anymore. I can't stay away from her."

He smirks. "Yeah. I got that when you let me burn you alive with holy water."

"Does this mean the Shield didn't work on me?"

"Hard to say. If Belias and Avaira have been hanging around for a few weeks, like you say, I'm sure they're following you."

I look back at Frannie, asleep on the couch. There has to be some way I can protect her.

"So maybe if we just disappeared-went somewhere else-she'd be safe?"

"Maybe. We won't know unless you try. But you know as well as I do the real solution."

"Tagging her soul for Heaven," I say, resigned. "Why is it so important that she forgives herself?"

His face suddenly goes all angelic. "Forgiveness is the key to everything, Lucifer."

"You celestials make everything so hard." I shift in my chair, sitting upright. "What would happen if Belias just… killed her?" I feel something black and heavy tighten around my heart thinking about how close he's already come.

"She'd go to Limbo with all the other untagged souls, and you know Michael would fast-track her to Heaven. Frannie's essence-her soul-is the key. As far as we're concerned, she's no less valuable in Heaven as on Earth."

"That's pretty much what I figured." I've seen that essence, and I know he's right. Dancing with it, blending it in mine… it was unlike anything I've ever experienced. "I won't let anything happen to her."

"I know. That's what I'm counting on." The threat is clear in his voice.

I look at her, asleep on the couch. "I won't let them have her," I say, knowing them is me. But just for now, I slide onto the couch and lie next to her, wrapping my arms around her and holding on as if my life depends on it-because I'm pretty sure it does.

21

Fire and Brimstone

FRANNIE

"You know I was just yanking Lucifer's chain about that whole virgin birth thing, right?"

I pull my head off the car door and look up at Gabe through the haze of my hangover. "What?"

"You know… that night you came over. After he told you about… what he is…"

"Oh, yeah. So, I'm not Mary?"

"No."

"Thank God. I'd make a shitty mother," I say, rubbing my forehead. "Plus, I'm hoping not to be a virgin too much longer." I drop my forehead back onto the car window with a thump that sends a shock wave through my head, turning my brains to tapioca. "Awww…" I groan.

Gabe laughs. "Serves you right."

"Shut up."

We pull up to my house, and Mom comes out onto the porch. Gabe opens my door and props me on my feet. I try to keep my legs under me as we move up the walk, but Gabe has to mostly drag me along. When we get to the stairs, he gives up and scoops me into his arms.

"Did you kids have a nice time?" Mom chirps.

What I want to know is, how many seventeen-year-old girls could show up hungover at nine o'clock in the morning draped in some guy's arms (even if that guy is a real honest-to-God angel, which my parents couldn't possibly know) and get a "did you have a nice time?" It's disgusting. Course, if I were lying here in Luc's arms, things would be different.

"Did we, Frannie?" Gabe is trying not to laugh and, if I had the strength, I'd punch him in the face.

But instead, I mumble, "Shut up," into his shoulder.

Mom follows us as he carries me up the stairs, and they tuck me into bed. I can hear sisters giggling, but I don't open my eyes to see which ones.

Gabe sits on the edge of my bed. He runs a finger along the line of

my jaw and even though I feel like death, I shudder. "You gonna be okay?"

"I will if you shoot me," I beg.

He leans down and his lips glide across my cheek to my ear, where he whispers, "No can do." He chuckles and I'm wondering if I can shoot him.

"Then get the hell out," I say, rolling on my side and pulling the covers over my head.

I hear Mom shuffle out of the room chattering about chicken soup. But Gabe's still here-I can feel him.

"What do you want?" I mumble into the sheets.

"The same thing I've always wanted. I want to tag your soul. You need to forgive yourself."

"No."

"Why? Why do you need to hold on to this?"

I'm not going to let myself cry. "Because." I breathe against the tears. "I need to."

"Need to what?"

He's making my head throb. "Can we do this some other time?"

"Let's do it now. What did you mean, 'I need to'?"

I groan as a sharp pain shoots through my brain. I pull the sheets off my head for some air. "I can't do this. You know everything I'm thinking anyway. Can't you just pick what you're looking for out of my head and leave me alone?"

"If you were thinking it, I could. That's where I'm trying to get you-to where you know why you can't let it go."

"Because I can't."

"Why?"

"Oh, God! Just go away."

The bed creaks as he slides closer and I feel his cool breath in my ear. "I'm not going anywhere, Frannie. I'll always be here for you-no matter what." His lips slide over my cheek and my headache's suddenly gone, replaced with a deep ache somewhere else. Somewhere I definitely shouldn't be aching. I roll and twist my hand into his hair. His lips brush mine-just as Mom pops back into the room with two steaming mugs in her hands.

"Oh! Oh dear…" she says.

Gabe's eyes smile into mine for a second longer before he shifts off the bed and stands. "I've really got to get going."

"Oh, don't go," Mom says with an awkward smile, holding out a mug. "Have some soup."

He smiles at her. "Thank you, Mrs. Cavanaugh, but Frannie's in good hands." He turns back to me. "I'll check on you later," he says, backing toward the door.

" 'Kay." It's all I can manage.

He leaves and I roll on my side toward the wall, ignoring Mom and her soup and trying to figure out what just happened. And I think about Luc. He's supposed to come over tonight, and I'm gonna try out this Sway thing with my parents, if I can figure out what it is-maybe change their minds about him.

But maybe my mind needs some work first.

I think of his Shelby parked across the street right now and feel my heart pound. I love him. I know that now. So why the hell do I still want to kiss Gabe?

LUC

I follow Gabriel and Frannie back to her house and sit out front most of the day. I watch her window, wondering what to say to impress her parents, or at least convince them I'm not the devil incarnate anymore. But as I sit here, staring at her window, I feel a sharp pain in my gut, and there are noises coming from down there. As time passes, the pain gets sharper and the noises get louder until it's impossible to ignore.

Unholy Hell, is that my stomach? Am I hungry? As I lift my arm to rub my stomach, I catch a whiff of myself and groan. Brimstone's got nothing on the way I smell right now. That's some serious stink. Not likely to impress Frannie's parents. Being human is turning out to be extremely inconvenient-and a little gross.

Before dusk, once I've confirmed that Gabriel is here, I take off and swing by the McDonald's drive-thru on my way back to my apartment for a shower. Turns out Big Macs aren't all that bad. Who knew?

It also turns out that there are more downsides to being human than I'd hoped. The list of stuff I'm going to need, just in the personal hygiene department, is staggering. I'm thinking about everything I need to take care of before my magic's completely gone-lots of big bank accounts and investments, lots of alternative identities for both Frannie and me in case we need to run, maybe an academic scholarship to UCLA-when I step through the door to my apartment and the pungent smell of brimstone hits me like a baseball bat to the face. I feel my face involuntarily pinch against the stench. So, okay, maybe I really don't smell that bad after all. How did I ever think the smell of brimstone was pleasant?

I look up through watering eyes at Beherit-my boss. Even though I can't sense the presence of demon or deity anymore, I should have expected this. He's here in all his Hellish glory: steaming, leathery, black-flecked crimson skin; short, twisted black horns that nearly scrape the ceiling; and his tail wrapped around his pelted satyr's waist. Though he'll never admit which sin he's born of, the fact that he's always draped in a short red robe and wearing his golden crown makes it obvious. He belongs to pride. His back is to me, admiring the Dore print near the kitchen. I think about backing out and closing the door-I was never here-but a twitch of his pointed ear lets me know it's too late for that.

I step through the door and close it behind me. "Is this a social call, Beherit, or is there something you need?"

He turns slowly, his hoof scraping across the linoleum, leaving a

smoldering black gash through the daises there. There's no humor in his flaming red eyes, and his fangs flash as a grimace contorts his flat, pinched face.

His voice is a low raspish hiss as he says, "What I needed was for you to do your job, Lucifer. Do it without stabbing me in the back. Did you really think you were worthy of my position? Well, now we all know better, don't we? You've demonstrated your ineptitude quite spectacularly, especially to King Lucifer."

The smell of dog breath and rotting meat permeates the brimstone. I smell it before I hear the snarls. Hellhounds. Perfect.

"This apartment complex doesn't allow pets, Beherit. I'm sorry, but you'll have to take your pooch…" I look toward the bathroom door as three immense black dogs, one with three heads and all with the glowing red eyes that demark all infernal creatures, come slinking out, "oh… excuse me, pooches, and leave."

"A shame. I thought you'd enjoy the company. You've been here for so long I figured you may be feeling a bit homesick."

"No. I'm really doing just fine, thanks."

In a smoking red flash he's across the room, and I'm choking as his burning fist clamps around my throat, nearly lifting me off the ground. And for the first time, I realize I truly am human, because my lungs are screaming for air as he holds me here, suspended and oxygen deprived.

"You're doing far from fine!" he rages and throws me across the room. I thud hard into the wall, face-first, and drop to the floor at the paws of the hounds, struggling to catch my breath. Turning human is really working to my disadvantage at the moment, and the blood trickling down my forehead and into my eye is definitely not going to help with the hound situation.

I sit up, brushing the back of my arm casually across my forehead, ignoring the throb in my head and the growl of the hounds. "Was that really necessary?"

Beherit's red eyes flare, and his face stretches into a heinous grin. "Blood? Oh, this is getting better by the minute," he says, stepping over and drawing a talon quickly across my chest, slicing through my T-shirt and the flesh under it like warm butter. As more blood seeps from the wound on my chest, he raises his head, sniffs the air, and scrunches his face. "I knew you didn't smell right. Thought I might be coming down with a cold." His bloody eyes shoot to the hounds. "This will save me having to drag you back to the Fiery Pit. So much easier than Belias and Avaira." He shakes his head slowly, a forlorn frown on his leathery lips. "Three of my best-what a waste…" Then his eyes flash. "Though, that's what happens to traitors. King Lucifer will see the error in his judgment when it's me who tags the child's soul. You

and Belias were never worthy."

Belias and Avaira, thrown into the Fiery Pit. I should be ecstatic, but instead my stomach turns. No second chances in the Underworld.

He sighs and his frown pulls into a grin. "They say if you want a job done right you have to do it yourself. But I don't understand, Lucifer. This should have been an easy one. She's such a tiny, helpless thing."

Frannie's face, so kissable, floats in front of my eyes. Tiny, yes-but far from helpless.

He looks to the hounds. "Cerberus, Barghest, Gwyllgi, I'll leave you to your job. I have mine," his eyes shift to me, "or, more accurately, yours, to do." And then he transforms into my human form.

No!

I swallow back my fear with the lump in my throat. "Really, I don't think we're going to be able to pull off the twins thing, Beherit. After all, we're trying to be inconspicuous. Twins draw too much attention," I say, pulling myself off the floor.

I watch as my face snarls back at me. "No worries. There won't be two of us for long," he says, and my face grins at me. He snaps his fingers, and the hounds are on me as he walks out the door.

What I wouldn't give for a box of Milk-Bones right now.

FRANNIE

When the lightning hits my brain, it shocks me awake. I roll to the side and dry heave into the trash can next to my bed as the image of Luc, laying in a heap on the floor and covered in blood, floats behind my eyelids.

"NO!"

The next thing I know, my mom is at the side of the bed, panicked. "Frannie, are you sick? What's wrong?"

Through my stupor, "No…" is all I can say… over and over. It's like every brain cell has short-circuited. I can't function-or think.

She starts to lift me to sitting. "Come on, honey. We're going to the doctor."

I find my voice. "No! I need Luc." My heart is beating impossibly fast, and I'm inching toward hyperventilation as stars dance in front of my eyes. "I need to find him."

And just then, there's a honk from the driveway. I spring from the bed and fly to the window. Luc is parked there in the Shelby. He smiles up at me and sticks his arm out the window, waving me down.

"Oh God!" I feel my blood start to flow again. He's not dead. "I have to go, Mom," I say, tugging my jeans on under my baggy T-shirt and running for the door on shaky legs.

"Frannie! What's this about?" she says as she chases me down the stairs.

"Nothing. Just give me a minute." I step through the door and slam it behind me. I run to his car and jump in, throwing myself around him.

"I'm happy to see you too," he says, a wicked gleam in his eye.

I pull back and look at him. He's alive-for now. "Something's going to happen. I saw you…"

"What, Frannie? What did you see?" He doesn't look frightened or concerned. If he looks anything, it would be eager-hungry.

"There was blood… you were…"

"Dead?" he finishes for me with a grin.

I just nod.

"Do I look dead, Frannie?"

"Not now. But it's going to happen."

"What? What's going to happen?"

"I don't know… maybe Belias…"

He interrupts me, shaking his head. "I've taken care of Belias. No need to worry about him anymore."

"What do you mean? Is he gone?"

"Very."

"So, something else, then… I know you're in danger."

"I'll be fine, don't worry."

But I am worrying. He reaches for me, and, as he pulls me into a kiss, I begin to calm down. My breathing slows and my heart ticks back down to a nearly normal pace.

I look up at him. "It was really creepy, Luc. Promise me you'll be careful."

"I was born careful. Nothing's going to happen."

I wish I could believe him. I look up, and my mom is staring out the front window at us. I'm sure she thinks I've lost it, which isn't going to help our cause at all. Especially after the Gabe thing earlier. I sigh. "So… you ready?"

"For what?"

"You know. The whole impressing the parents thing?"

"Oh. Yeah. About that…"

"Come on, Luc. I thought you were good with this. I really want you to be able to hang here this summer." More so now. I want him close.

"I'm really not up for it right now. I'd rather be alone with you," he says, and his eyes are on fire, making me tingle all over.

"What are you thinking about?"

"All the really outrageous things I could do to you-how I could make you feel if you'd let me."

I swallow thickly and take a deep breath as he pulls me to him. "Where's this coming from all of a sudden? You're the one who said we couldn't… you know." But the thing is, I'm starting to think about some of those "outrageous things" too.

"I've changed my mind. I want you," he says, his lips hot on my neck.

I tip my head back, giving him easier access. "So the whole lust thing is… what? No big deal now?"

"Nope. No big deal," he repeats as he reaches under my shirt. "We could just slide into the backseat…"

"Jesus, Luc! My mother's looking out the window at us right now," I say, pushing him away and tugging at my shirt. "Why are you acting so weird?"

He smiles wickedly. "You're driving me crazy."

"Fine, then let's go to your apartment."

"It's sort of a mess right now. Someone let some dogs in and they

got into the trash. Tore it to shreds."

"What? Who would do that?"

"Just an old friend. Nothing to worry about," he says with a wildly wicked grin, and, just for a second, I'm sure I smell rotten eggs. "Let's go somewhere else. I want you where I can make you crazy." He kisses me, hard and deep, then slides over in the seat and starts the ignition. He lays his hand on my thigh as he pulls out of my driveway.

We pull over on the corner of First and Amistad, near the park at the edge of my neighborhood. Almost before the car has stopped, he's all over me again. I look around and see the park is nearly empty. The play structure is abandoned, and the last of the moms is just pushing her stroller across the street in the pink dusk.

I lean into Luc's burning kiss as his touch, hot on my skin, raises goose bumps all over. After a long, deep kiss, I pull back gasping for air, my heart hammering, and hear his honey sweet whisper in my ear, "I want you so bad." I shudder as he eases his hands under my shirt and unhooks the clasp of my bra. My hand skims across his chest and under his T-shirt. "You won't ever forget this. I promise," he says, and I feel his fingertips burn a track across my belly toward the button of my jeans.

And it's then that I notice he's on fire. Hotter than he's been in a long time. My breath catches. "Hold up," I say, grabbing his hand just before it reaches its target. "I don't know where this is coming from. You've been telling me for weeks that we can't go there. I need to think." But it's really hard to think when he's offering me what I want more than anything.

For just an instant I swear I see rage darken his face before it smoothes into a perfect calm. "What's there to think about? I'm tired of waiting, Frannie. I want you so much I can't stand it anymore. I promise I'll make it amazing for you. The things I'll do to you…" The rest is lost as his hot tongue slips into my ear.

I can't focus, thinking about the things I want him to do to me, but what he said before still echoes in my head. We can't do this until I know it's safe for you. I take a deep breath and work to connect my last rational brain cell to my mouth. "What's changed, Luc?"

"Me. It's safe, I know it is. I'm human now. They can't get to us."

I want so badly to believe him, but that brain cell is fighting to be heard. I push his hand away from where it's working the button of my jeans. "That doesn't make any sense. You said we were in more danger now 'cause you couldn't see them coming." And all of a sudden I smell it again, rotten eggs. Oh God-brimstone. Belias?

Luc's eyes flare red, lighting up the dark car. "Come on, baby. You're killing me," he says. I feel like gravity just doubled and all the oxygen has been sucked off planet Earth. Luc would never call me

baby.

Holy shit! Belias. Think!

I hear Gabe's voice in my head: If you ever need anything, you know where to come. And even though I know it's probably a bad sign that I have so many voices in my head that aren't mine, for the moment, I'm okay with it.

"I know where we can go," I say, hooking my bra and trying not to panic. "We're house-sitting for a friend, just around the corner. The house is empty. We'll be all alone." My voice shakes, and my heart's trying to commit suicide by throwing itself relentlessly against my rib cage.

"Now we're talking. Where to?" he asks, starting up the Shelby.

"Take a left here."

I take him on a loop around the neighborhood, past Taylor's and back past my house, pretending to be lost, before I make up my mind what to do. Then, as we drive by the house with the huge potted Christmas cactus and porch swing I say, "Here," pointing to Gabe's house.

"Finally. I was starting to think you were just being a tease."

This guy is majorly pissing me off. "Just pull into the driveway."

He pulls in and I'm wondering if I did the right thing. Am I putting Gabe in danger? Will he know this isn't really Luc? And my biggest question, the one that's been eating me alive-if this is Belias, where is Luc? The vision of his bloody body crumpled on the floor taunts me, and I swallow back my terror along with the bile rising in the back of my throat.

As I step out of the car, my panic slips into despair. The house is dark. What if Gabe's not here?

Luc-a-like is around the car, grabbing me, and we start heading for the front door. It's only then that I realize I don't have a key, and I can't exactly knock, since the house is supposed to be empty…

"I think the front door might be unlocked," I say, hoping I'm right.

When we get to the door, I see I'm more than right. The door is actually swinging open, exposing the darkness within.

"Remind me never to have you house-sit," Luc-a-like snorts.

"Yeah… well…" My mind is racing. Maybe Gabe has something gold or silver that I can use.

He pushes me through the door and closes it behind us. It's pitch black, and he's all over me-hands everywhere. As I look desperately around in the dark, I don't need to see it to remember that everything is white. No gold, no silver. No nothing.

"Let's find a bed," Luc-a-like rasps in my ear.

"Um… maybe upstairs," I say loud enough that if anyone is here they'll hear me.

He pulls me toward the stairs, lit only by a thin silver slant of moonlight crossing the family room from the window and trailing up the lower few. But as we reach the banister Luc-a-like freezes in his tracks and looks around warily.

"Whose house did you say this was?"

"Just a friend's."

He looks at me with a grimace, and, as I watch in the pale moonlight, he morphs into-something. In just a few seconds, he's towering over me, the heat burning my scalp where he's grabbed a handful of my hair. The stench of singeing hair and rotten eggs is unbearable, making my eyes water.

Reflexively, I drop into a crouch and swing a leg high into his chest, but he's suspending me by my hair, so my balance is off and I don't get any leverage behind the kick. Still, the crunch of his bones under my foot is unmistakable.

I think the thing is chuckling-not the reaction I was hoping for-except it sounds choked and dry, almost like coughing.

"Oooh… fire!" he rasps. "I like that." Then he drags me a step back from the stairs. "Very clever, mortal. But, see, we demons have a sixth sense." He turns and hisses loudly, "You're too late, Gabriel."

I regroup and take another swing, this time at the arm holding me suspended. But I barely connect. He leers down at me, shaking me by the hair. "This was charming before, but now it's becoming annoying. Stop."

Just as my heart sinks, Gabe's symphonic voice comes from everywhere all at once-surround sound deluxe, "You'll want to let her go, Beherit."

And then he's there, at the top of the stairs, except I can't see him. All I see is a vague shape from which intense white light is emanating. His glow illuminates the whole room, including the monster holding me captive. I look up at its hideous face and hear myself groan as all the blood in my body runs instantly cold. It's not Belias. This one is bigger and nastier-looking, if that's possible, and smells much worse-as if breathing wasn't already hard enough through my panicked gasps.

"Gabriel, you've always had a wonderfully droll sense of humor. Why would I let my prize go?"

"Because she's not your prize. You don't have any claim to her. Her soul is clean."

"Hmm… yes, Lucifer didn't give me much to work with, did he? He found this assignment… challenging." He scowls down at me and chuckle-coughs again. "Falling in love. Love!" He lets out a sharp bark of a laugh. "How quaint is that!"

"Yes, it was a completely transforming, life-altering event. You've heard the saying, love conquers all?"

"Well, in the end, it hasn't conquered anything, has it? He's dead and I'm holding the prize."

"Dead is all relative, don't you think?"

My heart soars at the sound of Luc's voice. But as I pivot toward the kitchen, like a Christmas tree ornament dangling from a string, my heart sinks. Luc is covered in blood, his T-shirt in tatters and several deep gashes across his chest, shoulders, and right cheek.

"Oh my God," I gasp.

"Your God can't save either of you," the monster rasps and chuckles. He lifts me up to his eye level by my hair and it feels like my head is ripping off my body. "You belong to the other team now."

"You seriously want to rethink that, Beherit," Luc says, stepping through the kitchen door into the family room.

Beherit laughs-a thunderous bellow that shakes the entire house. "You're making threats? You-a half-dead mortal with no leverage?" he snarls, lowering my feet back to the floor, where I continue to dangle like a marionette. "I'll deal with you when I'm finished with your little pet." He shakes me by my hair.

"Oh, I've got leverage. And it's ironic that you should mention pets…" Luc's smile makes my heart sputter, and I feel my arm reach out to him. His eyes bore through mine, and in the door behind him, I see five pairs of huge, glowing red eyes staring back at me from the dark of the kitchen. Luc steps sideways at the same instant he snaps his fingers, and three ginormous black dogs, one with three heads, explode from the kitchen door, teeth bared, and are on me in a heartbeat.

Except, they're not on me, they're on him-the thing holding me. And Luc is there too. He has my hand and he's yelling something at me. With the noise of the dogs and my confusion, I don't get it right away, but then I understand. He's saying, "Use it, Frannie!"

My Sway. What do I do? I don't even know what it is or how it works.

"Let me go." It comes out as a strangled croak and nothing happens. I try again. "You don't want me! Let me go!" I say louder.

I feel his grip loosen on my hair as he bats at the snapping dogs with his other hand. Luc is pulling my arm. Dogs are everywhere, snapping and snarling.

"You don't want me!" I scream. I yank myself away from Beherit, leaving behind a large handful of singed hair, and Luc pulls me across the room. One of the dogs follows me, and I crouch, ready to unleash a kick, but Luc pulls me back just before my foot connects with its shoulder.

"You really don't want to piss Barghest off. Especially after he's just saved our sorry asses."

"Barghest?"

"An old friend of mine. I was on what you might call canine patrol for a long time-guarding the Gates of Hell. Barghest and I were pretty tight for nearly a millennium, though it took him a little longer than I would have hoped to recognize me in all my humanity," he gestures to the bleeding claw marks across his chest.

Barghest tips his head to the side as he whimpers, then he turns and sits, his back to us, and growls at the foray at the bottom of the stairs. I can't watch as the dogs rip at Beherit, so I turn back to Luc and try to find a spot I can touch him.

"Why didn't they attack me too?" I ask, nestling into his right side.

"I told them not to." He grins again. "And my talisman-your red bra-came in handy for scent. Now it's Barghest's job to protect you."

I let go of Luc and turn to look at the dog sitting in front of me, his shoulders at the same height as mine. "Protect me from what?"

Luc's face darkens for just a moment. "Hell," he says, "and everything in it."

I start to tuck back into his side when I feel something brush through my wild hair. Luc suddenly pulls back and doubles over. "Ahhh."

"Luc? What's wrong?"

He groans and looks up at Beherit, his face contorted in pain and his eyes glowing red. Then I see the glint of the handle of a dagger sticking out of his shoulder. As Luc pulls it out, I understand. Gold. Luc's weakness.

Heart pounding out of my chest, adrenaline on overload, I turn to Beherit and see Gabe advancing down the stairs, enveloping him in white light. It's almost like looking into a cloud during an electrical storm. Little flickers of lightning flash in the white light. The hair on my body stands on end, and the smell of ozone is thick in the air. And when the lightning bolt shoots out of Gabe's palm and hits Beherit, I scream.

Beherit's face twists in agony, and his groans roll through the house as the dogs continue to attack. But his focus is on Luc and me, and, under the pain, there's a triumphant sneer.

As I stare, frozen with fear and rage, another golden dagger materializes in Beherit's hand. That shocks me out of my stupor.

"Stop!" I yell. "Leave him alone. He doesn't matter to you anymore." I step forward, between him and Luc. "I'll come with you if you leave him alone."

As Beherit roars in victory, Luc grabs my hand, still doubled over. He's shaking his head, his eyes wide and bulging as he bites back an agonized moan. Curls of black smoke issue from the bleeding knife wound in his left shoulder. "No. Use your Sway."

I can't think. I choke back a sob and turn to Beherit. "Stop!" I yell again, and Barghest growls as I pull loose from Luc and take another step forward. "Leave Luc alone! I'll come with you. Just leave Luc alone! Please!"

My heart's throbbing as I move slowly across the floor toward the stairs. My shirt rips where Barghest tries to get a mouthful of it, but I keep walking. Gabe's white light flashes brighter in a warning that I ignore as I step within reach of Beherit.

Beherit raises his head and roars again. At the same instant I feel talons pierce the flesh of my shoulder, I crouch and lunge for his other clawed hand, where he's still holding the golden dagger. I grab the dagger, swing around, still in a crouch, and leap up, pushing it hard into his chest. "Go to Hell!" I scream.

But it's drowned out by his scream, high and long, a sound I can't imagine doesn't rupture my eardrums. As I hit the ground, I close my eyes and hold my breath, not knowing what the sensation will be when he kills me.

As Beherit's scream dies away, intense heat sears through me. But instead of agony I feel serenity settle over me. Maybe death, even at the hand of the devil, isn't so bad after all.

But then I realize the heat is coming from behind me, and I open my eyes to find Barghest between me and Beherit, tearing at Beherit's arm. When I turn, Luc's there, and it's not just his eyes-his whole body is glowing red. It's his heat I feel coursing through me as he wraps me in a protective field.

Gabe's light flashes again, nearly blinding me. Beherit shrieks, and, through the glare, I see thick black ichor oozing from where the dagger pierced his chest as tendrils of thick, oily smoke enfold his upper body in a cloud. What feels like a sonic boom knocks me back a step, and when Gabe's light fades, all that remains where Beherit was is a bellow of hissing black smoke and the stench of burnt meat and brimstone. He and the dogs are gone.

Gabe rushes down the stairs, his glow fading as he comes, and now I can see the expression on his face. Anguish.

"Gabe?" He runs past me, and I feel black dread squeeze my heart just as I hear a thud behind me. I turn back to see the image that I've been unable to shake since I awoke with it in my head: Luc lying crumpled on the floor, corpse-white under smeared crimson blood.

22

Redemption

FRANNIE

The hospital is too cold and too bright and it smells and I hate it. But I can't leave, even though they already told us Luc isn't going to make it. I can't leave him here.

The only thing getting me through this is Gabe. His arms are around me like a cocoon, and he hasn't let me go, even when they stitched my shoulder.

"I don't get it," I say through my tears. "He was human, so why would it matter that Beherit took all things Hell with him? That wasn't Luc anymore."

There's pain in Gabe's eyes and sympathy on his face. "You changed him physically, but his life force was tethered to Hell. It's what he was for over seven millennia. There can't really be a separation. And, in the end, he embraced that side of himself. He called on that infernal power to save you."

I think about Luc-his heat and how he glowed as he used the last of his power to wrap me in a field-and my heart shrivels into a hard ball. He should have saved himself, not me.

People walk through the hospital waiting room like it's any other day. Like the world didn't just end. How can that be? The world should be crashing down all around us.

My shoulder stings where the anesthesia is wearing off, and I can feel the tug of the bandages and stitches, but I wish it was worse. I wish Beherit had killed me. Then maybe Luc and I would be together. I bury my face in my hands and I feel Gabe's arms around me, pulling me to his shoulder. "This can't be happening. It's all my fault."

"I'm so sorry, Frannie."

"This is so not fair. He was good-I know it. He doesn't belong in Hell."

"He wasn't tagged for Hell. There's no guarantee that's where he went."

"But you said Beherit took him back to Hell."

"No, Frannie. I don't know that."

My breath catches. "You mean he could be in Heaven?"

He strokes my hair. "It's possible. His mortal soul was clean."

LUC

It's quiet and white and… empty. A void. Just like my mind. I'm aware of a body-mine, I guess, but I can't see or feel it. I can't see anything. I'm peaceful and I let myself drift. But then I'm being pulled through time and space in a dizzying rush.

King Lucifer.

When I stop and the vertigo settles, I open my eyes, sure I'll find myself in Pandemonium. But instead I'm at the end of a long white corridor that fades into the distance. In front of me is a pair of swinging wooden doors with a peeling plastic sign taped to it reading LIMBO.

Limbo. Where untagged souls go after death to be sorted.

So, guess that means I'm dead.

The sudden realization that I won't see Frannie again-touch her-kiss her-hits me hard, rocking me back on my heels. I fight to get air into my lungs, but then I remember that I don't need to breathe anymore. I'm dead.

But Frannie's not. She's safe.

It's that knowledge that helps clear my head. Frannie's safe. Without me in the way, she'll let Gabriel tag her and she'll be fine. He'll protect her. This is good. The only way I could ever leave her. She'll be better off now.

I gather myself and push through the swinging doors into an endless room. The ceiling is low, with humming florescent fixtures, but the walls stretch away into oblivion. In front of me there's an old wooden desk with various magazines scattered over its dark, nicked surface and a handwritten sign taped to the front. The writing is a sloppy cursive scrawl in heavy black marker and reads, TAKE A NUMBER AND HAVE A SEAT. Next to the sign is a plastic red number dispenser. I step up to the dispenser and look beyond the desk. As far as I can see, stretching into infinity, there are rows of black plastic chairs, most of which are occupied by the countless souls waiting to hear their fate. Others mill around aimlessly, wailing and crying about being dead. All are in shades of gray or beige, some shot through with black, vermillion, or ochre-the middle ground. These are the souls that weren't tagged before death because they didn't clearly fall on one side or the other.

I look down at myself for the first time, expecting obsidian black, but instead I find bright white with swirls of sapphire blue and dusk rose. White? I gaze in awe for more than a few minutes then collect myself and draw a number from the dispenser. The paper tab tears off, and I look to see a large ONE stamped on the green paper in gold leaf.

I look up at the lit monitor over the desk. "Now serving number 64,893,394,563,172,289,516," it declares. I look back at my number.

One.

"Number one, please report to office number one." I hear the androgynous, monotone voice clearly in my head, but the monitor doesn't change. And as I stand here wondering where I'm supposed to find office number 1, a carved wooden door materializes in front of me with a large golden 1 painted on it. I turn the knob and push the door slowly open.

Gathering myself and stepping through it, I find myself in a large, brightly lit room with an immense mahogany desk and a high-backed chair in the middle. The room looks deceptively inviting. The comforting scent of hickory wafts from a cheerful fire burning on the hearth of a large fireplace in the back of the room. Beige leather couches and chairs are scattered between numerous bookshelves. Among the titles strewn across a low mahogany coffee table near me, I see Dante's Purgatorio and can't help smiling. Michael has done his homework.

His back is turned to me as he hovers just off the ground to one side of the fireplace, white robes blowing gently in a nonexistent breeze.

Very theatrical.

He turns slowly and smiles, but there's no warmth in that smile. He tugs on his black goatee and studies me. His dark hair and skin contrast with his pale blue eyes, making them appear to glow and giving him an ominous look-meant to intimidate, no doubt. Michael is known for that.

"Welcome, Lucifer. Apparently the Almighty has put you on the fast track. I would have made you wait." He gestures to a comfortable-looking leather chair in front of his desk. "Have a seat."

"No thanks. I prefer to stand." I've been around too long to let my guard down around an archangel. Especially this one. An eternity of passing judgment has given him a God complex.

The whole innocent-until-proven-guilty concept applies to Heaven and Hell as well, and Limbo is under Heaven's control. Michael's, specifically. You'd think that would work in their favor, but Michael believes in strict quality control, so actually the numbers usually come out to Hell's advantage.

I take one more step forward. "What's the deal? Why am I not in Hell?"

"If you're that eager to burn in the Inferno for all eternity, so be it. I mistakenly thought you might want to discuss alternatives." He waves his hand dismissively and turns to glide behind his desk.

I swallow my pride, along with the thick lump in the back of my

throat. "Wait." I follow him to the desk and slide into the leather chair. "What alternatives?"

His eyes soften and his expression hints at amusement. "It appears there's someone in the mortal realm who wants you back. Quite desperately, actually. It's really quite touching. It also happens that this someone has a fair amount of Sway, which apparently extends to the celestial, because Gabriel is having a difficult time saying no."

My head spins. Is it possible? Could Frannie have enough Sway to will me back to life? I've never heard of such a thing happening. But I've also never heard of a demon becoming human…

"From the look on your face, I take it this would be an acceptable alternative?"

I snap out of my musings to find a smile on my face and a tear coursing down my cheek. I wipe both away and look hard at Michael. "Is it possible?"

"It is. But there are conditions. This isn't a free pass."

My heart sinks. A catch. There's always a catch. "What conditions?"

"What we know is that Frannie changed you. Her Sway is powerful." What he doesn't say, but I read in his eyes, is that by powerful he means dangerous. A mortal with Sway over mortals is one thing. But a mortal with Sway over the infernal and celestial is quite another. He's scared of her.

As if he read my thoughts, because I'm sure he did, his temper flares. "She wants you now, and she got you by making you mortal." He spits out the last word as if it tastes bad. "What none of us knows is what will happen when she doesn't want you anymore. Humans, after all, can be quite fickle." A self-satisfied smirk settles across his features as he listens in while I ponder that.

I know it was Frannie's Sway-her love-that changed me, but I'd never stopped to consider what would happen if her feelings changed. If she didn't want me anymore, would I stay human? Die? Change back into a demon?

"What conditions?" I ask again with a heavy heart. There's no use putting up a front when he's in my head.

"Convince her to forgive herself so Gabriel can tag her for Heaven."

It sounds simple enough, and it's what I've wanted her to do all along, but I don't miss the look in his eye as he says it. Something vacillating between greed and lust.

"What will happen to her once she's tagged?"

"That's not your concern," he says dismissively with a wave of his hand.

I spring out of the chair. "Like hell it's not." My hands on his desk,

I lean across it, toward him. "She wants a life. If she's tagged for Hell, she won't have one. She'll be King Lucifer's puppet. Tell me that won't happen if she's tagged for Heaven."

"I can't say what will happen. It's not my call."

My voice shakes as I fight to keep my rage in check. "I don't believe you."

He stares at me and shakes his head. "You poor, pathetic boy. Acting like you have any pull here. You will do this, or you'll burn in the Inferno."

I look back at myself. White. I can't see how it's possible, but I'm clean. No black. No gray. No red. White. "What sin sends me to the Inferno?"

His smile is amused, but there's frustration hidden behind the facade. "You're joking."

I can't read his thoughts, but I can read his eyes. He's bluffing. I keep my voice soft-calm-as I call him on the lie. "You don't have to send me back to Frannie, but you can't send me to the Abyss."

His eyes flare red for just a second before he pounds his fist through the top of the desk. To my ears his voice sounds as indistinct as a thunderclap, but in my head I hear the words within the roar clearly. "Maybe not, but I can make you wish I had!"

Can Heaven be a living Hell? If there's anyone who could make it that, it would be Michael. But it's better that it's my living Hell-not Frannie's. Before looking into Michael's eyes, I would have thought Frannie being tagged for Heaven was a good option. They generally don't use their own too roughly, and with Gabriel looking out for her…

Now I'm not sure. Frannie's only chance at a life may be if she stays untagged. Gabriel wouldn't betray her… would he? "Fine. The Abyss it is."

Shock stretches his eyes wide. Apparently that's not the answer he expected. In his misplaced confidence, he forgot to spy on my thoughts. "I don't think you understood me. You're doing this. I'm giving you a second chance. You should be grateful."

"I don't believe in second chances." I turn and walk out the door. As I slam through it, Michael's growl trails off, and everything goes quiet and white. I'm drifting again. If this nothingness is Heaven, I may have made the wrong choice. I'm not sure I can just drift for all of eternity.

But then I picture Frannie's sapphire eyes, and I'm no longer drifting, I'm soaring. I hear Frannie laughing, smell the clove and currant of her soul, feel her touch as surely as if she were here with me. And then my essence is swirling and blending with hers.

This is Heaven.

FRANNIE

In my dream, Luc and I are dancing under the stars-spinning and laughing like we're one person, sharing one body. I feel him everywhere, inside and out. His touch feels like Heaven, and I hear myself moan. I want to be this close to him forever-to die right here in his arms.

"Frannie?" Gabe's voice is soft in my ear. As I open my eyes and they adjust to the harsh lighting, it takes me a second to get my bearings. We're still in the waiting room at the hospital, and I'm cradled against Gabe's chest. "Hey, Frannie, wake up," he says, smoothing a hand over my burned and snarled hair.

It's the sting in my shoulder and the telltale smell of singed hair that confirms that it wasn't all just a really bad dream.

"Frannie?" he says again.

"Yeah, I'm awake. Can we just go home? Please?" I say into his chest as I feel tears sting my swollen eyes.

"Hey," Gabe says, and I feel his finger under my chin, lifting my face to look at him. When I look at his face, he's smiling, and the pain is gone from his sparkling blue eyes.

"What?" I ask. "What happened?" I look up at a smiling doctor in green hospital scrubs.

"Your friend is out of surgery," the doctor says. "I truly can't explain it, short of a miracle. They resuscitated him in the ambulance, but he was in bad shape when he got here. We lost him for a long time on the operating table, but we were able to get him back. He really shouldn't have survived…"

"So… what are you saying?" The desperation in my voice rings clear.

"It looks like he's going to be fine. We'll know for sure in the next few hours. Just keep praying."

My heart explodes into a million pieces and I start to hyperventilate. Tears course down my cheeks as I struggle to breathe, and I bury my face in my hands. "Oh my God. Luc."

23

On a Wing and a Prayer

FRANNIE

They finally let me in to see Luc this morning, but I can't bring myself to even look at him. Because, after everything, I know what needs to happen, and I've spent the last two days agonizing over it. I stare blindly out the window at the mist falling outside, making everything look filmy and ghostlike. I know I should say something, but I don't trust my voice. I pull a deep breath and try to concentrate on what I have to do.

I lean my forehead into the glass. "The doctor didn't say he found anything… weird in there when he was digging around?"

"No."

"So, I guess that means you're human now?"

"Guess so."

I can't breathe. I need to get out of here. I move toward the door without turning around. "I should probably go."

"Frannie, talk to me." His voice, the desperation in it, stops me in my tracks.

I raise my hand to my face, trying to erase the evidence of my tears. I turn slowly to face him, and his expression almost kills me. How can I do this? I'm not strong enough. I drop my eyes to the floor.

He holds out his hand to me, and I can't help myself. I walk to the bed and sit on the edge of it. At his touch, my heart races, but I still don't look at him.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he says, and I feel tears well up in my eyes again.

"I'm thinking we shouldn't be together. I'm bad for you."

He heaves a huge sigh. When he speaks, he doesn't even try to hide the laughter in his voice. "You? You're bad for me?"

I can't believe he's making fun of me-making light of this whole thing. Anger flares deep inside me, and I hear it in my voice. I pull my eyes from the blankets and glare at him. "I almost got you killed. You were immortal and I took that from you. You'd have lived forever if it wasn't for me."

"Living forever isn't all it's cracked up to be. The piece of forever I've lived is plenty."

"You're just saying that." I turn my head away, trying to clear it and get myself together.

He reaches up for my cheek and turns me to face him. "Frannie, look at me." My eyes reluctantly slide to his. "For this feeling," he taps his free hand on his chest, "I'd have given up anything. I'd say my immortality was a small price to pay, but I don't feel like I've paid anything. I feel like I've been paid with the most valuable thing anyone could ever want." A tear slips over my lashes, and he wipes it away. "You love me. What else could I ever ask for?"

I feel hot tears on my cheek as I lean down to kiss him.

"Don't mind me or anything." And out of the blue-literally-Gabe is sitting in the chair under the window, looking all angelic.

Luc glares over my shoulder at him. "You really need to stop doing that. Didn't your mother ever tell you it's rude not to knock?"

But then it hits me. I know what needs to happen. I hop up, feeling a thousand times lighter, and walk over to Gabe. I grab his hand and pull him out of the chair. "We need to talk."

I drag him out the door as Luc watches with concerned amusement on his face, and we find a bench in the hall. I sit with my elbows on my knees, resting my forehead in my hands.

The din of the hospital is white noise-generic-and I focus on that to slow the whir of my spinning head. I wind my fingers into my hair and stare at the floor between my feet. "You want to tag me for Heaven."

"Yes," Gabe says.

"And they'll stop coming for me if you do."

"Eventually."

"But I have to forgive myself."

"Yes."

I pull my head from my hands, surprised at how light it feels. "I'll cut you a deal," I say, the anchor lifting from my heart.

Gabe leans back on the bench and smiles up at me as I walk back into Luc's room. I slide onto the edge of his bed, and his eyes narrow as he laces his fingers in mine. "What was that all about?" He can't hide the jealousy in his voice.

"Nothing," I say.

He drops my hand and his eyes search mine.

I run a finger over his cheek, outlining the bandage on his face, and he shudders. He pulls a sigh and reaches for my face. "You know, when I told you to use your Sway with Beherit, I meant to save yourself, not me."

I press my cheek into his hand. "I couldn't think. I just… knew what I wanted."

He pulls me into a kiss, but just as our lips touch, there's a knock at the door. He holds me around the neck when I try to back away, and we finish our kiss. Then he smiles and yells, "Come in!"

The door swings open. Gabe smiles, all proud of himself for knocking. "Heads up!" he says, and, with a flick of his wrist, a shiny silver object on a chain sails across the room.

Luc grabs it out of the air before it slams into his face. "Thanks," he says to Gabe.

Gabe props himself on the doorframe. "I'm not your errand boy. Next time you need something, get it yourself."

I look at the object in Luc's hand. It's a crucifix; larger than the last one and with a pointed end.

"I had this for you… that night." He smiles wanly. "But I got a little sidetracked before I could give it to you." He folds the crucifix into my hand.

Gabe meanders into the room. "You're going home tomorrow."

I pull away from Luc and look at Gabe. "How do you know?"

He shoots me a sardonic glance and slouches back into the chair under the window.

"Gabriel…" Luc's face shifts through frustration into anger and finally seems to settle on confused. "How…?" he asks.

"The decision was already made. It was never up to Michael." His glance shoots to me and his eyes sparkle. "She wanted it, and you earned it." Then he looks back at Luc, his expression serious. "Plus, we need your help."

Luc nods at him. "Thanks."

He quirks half a smile. "It wasn't my decision either. You've impressed Him." His eyes shift to the ceiling.

I look from Luc to Gabe and back, confused. "What are you guys talking about?"

Luc smiles at me. "You've got archangels quaking in their boots."

That was a very unhelpful reply.

Gabe slides out of his chair and moves to the side of the bed, placing his hand on my shoulder. "Let's just say there was some dissension in the ranks, but we've got it sorted now." He looks back at Luc. "How are you feeling?"

Luc flashes his winning smile and squeezes my hand. "Invincible."

"Well, just remember that you're not anymore, so if you want to be around to look after Frannie, reckless abandon isn't your best strategy."

Luc rolls his eyes.

Gabe grins, blinding me. "Yeah, that's what I thought you'd say, so I recruited you some help. He's fresh out of training-just yesterday, as a matter of fact-but there's no one better for the job."

"Hey Frannie." The voice is musical, like Gabe's but different. It's lighter somehow. I turn and, on the other side of the room, there's a boy, maybe seventeen, medium height, with sandy-blond curls, sky-blue eyes, and the face of… well… an angel. He's leaning against the wall, hands in his jeans pockets, smiling at me.

All the air is knocked out of me and my legs suddenly go weak. "Matt?" I can barely get the word out. He looks just like the image from my head-the way I pictured he'd look if he was still alive.

He smiles and the glare burns my retinas. "In the flesh-sort of."

I turn to Gabe. "I don't…" but I can't form the rest of the thought.

Matt laughs-a sound like wind chimes. "I'm your guardian angel." He laughs again. "Would you ever have thunk it when I was sticking gum in your hair and stealing your bike?"

My shaky legs start moving, carrying me across the room. I feel the tears start to slip down my cheeks, but there's not a thing I can do about it. I can't even begin to reconcile the emotions whirring through me. But as I reach him, it's guilt that finds a voice. I can't look him in the eye. "Oh my God… Matt, I'm sorry."

He wraps an arm around me and pulls me to his shoulder. "There's nothing to be sorry for, Frannie. You need to let it go."

"I can't." I look up at Gabe, whose eyes bore a hole through me. I can almost feel him rummaging around in my head, looking for the answers.

"You have to, or there's no point in my being here." He shoots a glance at Luc.

All my insides are Jell-O and my head feels full of cotton. I can't think. But then a thought peeks through the fog. "Mom and Dad. Oh my God! They're going to die when they see you!" My breath catches when I realize what I just said. "I mean…"

Matt pulls me to his shoulder again. "No, Frannie. They can't know. Nobody can."

"Why?"

"It's just how it is. It's strictly forbidden for us to show ourselves to anyone who knew us. Especially family."

I pull my face out of his shoulder. "I knew you."

He glances at Gabe. "An exception was made due to extenuating circumstances," he says in this low, official-sounding voice.

I look up and Gabe is shaking his head.

I smile, but then I'm crying again. "So I killed you, but I'm the only one who gets you back? How is that fair?"

"I have no clue what to say to get you to see it wasn't your fault."

"But it was my fault." I sob into his T-shirt, getting snot all over him. "I was there, remember? The one yanking on your leg and pulling you out of the tree?"

"You know I can't lie now, right? It wasn't your fault. You have to believe that."

I start to feel really dizzy as my throat closes. I let go of him and drop my hands to my knees, trying to suck air into my collapsing lungs.

"Get a nurse!" Luc says, and I hear him struggling with the IV stand.

But then I smell summer snow and feel Gabe's arms around me. "Frannie, breathe," he says, his breath cool in my ear.

I shudder and pull tighter into him.

"Slow and easy," he whispers.

And I find he's right. If I breathe slowly, I can get some air in. The stars dancing in front of my eyes start to fade.

I straighten up and Gabe lets me go. I stare at Matt, wiping my nose on my sleeve. I can't believe this. I've wanted him back so much, and here he is. I dive into his chest again and wrap my arms around him, determined to never let him go. "Oh my God."

He smiles. "It's going to be okay, Frannie. Really."

His smile is contagious. I sniffle and smile back through my tears. "Why do you look seventeen-or how I thought you'd look at seventeen? How come you don't still look seven?"

His smile widens. "Camouflage. There'll be times I need to be visible, and a seven-year-old following you around would look pretty stupid, don't you think?"

"I guess."

Luc clears his throat loudly. A goofy grin stretches my face as I pull Matt over to his bed. "So, Matt, this is Luc. Luc, Matt."

Luc's brow creases, then his eyes spring wide. "It was you… at the graduation party, with Belias."

He looks at Luc without smiling. "That was my field test."

"I assume you passed?"

Matt glares at him. "Of course." He turns to me. "So, I won't be around all the time," his eyes narrow and shift to Luc briefly, "because there's stuff you guys do that I really don't want to see. But if you need me, I'll be there."

Luc holds out a hand to Matt. "We're happy for the backup."

He just looks at Luc's hand, his expression bordering on repulsion.

All of a sudden, the joy I felt is gone. I look between them, trying to understand what just happened, as Luc drops his hand.

"Don't try to be a hero, Lucifer," Gabe says to break the awkward silence. He fixes Luc in a hard gaze. "If you need help, call for it."

Luc glowers at him. "Yes, mother."

He smiles. "Speaking of mothers, you have some visitors."

And just then, there's a knock at the door. Matt vanishes as it

swings open, and it's a good thing, because Mom and Dad are standing there, McDonald's bag in hand.

"A godsend," Luc mutters, then grimaces. "Hospital food is an acquired taste."

I managed to weasel out of the church retreat that my family is at 'cause I'm still recovering from the "dog attack."

Instead, I browse through my closet, deciding what I'm gonna need in LA, and glance at Luc, who is standing near my dresser. He's been out of the hospital for a week and most of the bandages are off. A bloodred scar twists down his face from just below the outside corner of his right eye to the middle of his cheek. Dark and dangerous is now scarred and sexy. Mmm… yummy.

"Are you taking this?" he asks with a raised eyebrow, the strap of my black lace bra looped over his finger.

"Probably. I need something to get those UCLA guys all hot and bothered."

His face darkens as he tucks it back into my drawer.

"Course, if you come with me, I won't have time for any of those lightweights." I try to seem casual as I saunter over and wrap myself around him, but I'm all kinds of tense.

His expression clears as he ties my hair back in a knot. "Where else would I be?"

I blow out a nervous sigh. "So, you'll come to LA?"

"I'd like to see you try and stop me," he says with his wicked grin.

I look around at my papered walls, and it hits me for the first time how much I'm gonna miss home. But what I also realize in this instant is that anyplace with Luc is home. "What are you gonna do when we get there?"

"Maybe take a class or two… get a job." He shrugs. "Whatever."

"With seven thousand years of job experience, you should be able to find something."

He cracks a smile. "I don't think there are too many openings in damning souls to Hell."

I smile back. "It's LA. You might be surprised."

He laughs but then gets all serious and pulls me tighter. "I'm really not sure this is a great idea. It's not over, you know. If King Lucifer let him live, Beherit will send someone else-or come back himself now that it's personal." He rubs his chin with his thumb. "You actually may have killed him, Frannie. From his reaction it looked like gold was his weakness. That dagger to his brimstone heart… hard to say."

I'm not sure how I feel about that. I pull away and look up at Luc, trying to shake off the sudden wave of guilt. "So if that's true,

according to you, I'm tagged for Hell now for sure."

His eyes flash, and he goes instantly pale. "What are you talking about?"

"If I killed him, I'm just like Tom. You said no extenuating circumstances. Straight to Hell for me. Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars."

Uncertainty clouds his eyes. "It was self-defense. And killing a demon is different," he says, like he's trying it out to see if it sounds right.

"Now you're making exceptions? You're such a hypocrite."

His face hardens into a determined scowl. As if he can make it so through sheer force of will, he says, "You're not tagged for Hell."

When I don't say anything, he turns toward the window, his face dark and brooding. He stares out at nothing and says, "This is my fault. I never should have come here."

"They would have sent someone else-someone like Belias."

He shakes his head slowly and turns back to look me in the eye. "He never would have found you."

But Luc did. We've been connected from the beginning. I press into him and he folds me into his arms.

"I just want to keep you safe," he whispers into my hair. "Gabriel and Matt can do that better than I can."

"I feel safe right here," I say, still burrowed into him.

"We can't do this on our own, Frannie. We're going to need Gabriel's and Matt's help. Especially if you insist on going to LA."

I pull back and look at him. "Okay, so if going to LA isn't a good idea, what do you suggest we do?"

"We should just take off. Find somewhere to hide." That wicked sparkle is back in his eyes, and a hint of a smile curls his lips. "Maybe buy some deserted tropical island somewhere… just us, clothing optional."

I laugh, kinda liking the sound of that. "I could live with that, but you're the one who said they can find us anywhere."

He looks hopeful. "That was before. Did you notice? Beherit didn't know I was at Gabriel's that night. I shouldn't have been able to surprise him-and I had the hounds with me, so my Shield hid them too. With some help from Matt, this might just work." He thinks for a second, then smiles. "And I suppose LA's as good a place to get lost as any."

I hope he's right, but right now all I want to do is lose myself in him. I press tight into his body and bury my face in his chest. "I love you."

"I know. That's the only thing that saved me. You're my redemption." He leans down and kisses me.

I gaze into his perfect eyes and trace my finger lightly down the scar on his cheek. He closes his eyes and shudders, then sighs. I press closer into him, knowing what I want. "Do that thing again."

He smiles and opens his eyes, but his brow creases. "I don't think I can."

I stretch up on my tiptoes, loop my arms around his neck, and pull him into a kiss. "Try," I whisper into his lips, wanting to feel that close to him again.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath and leans into me, kissing me deeply. After a minute he pulls back. "I can't. My essence is human now-a soul. It can't leave my body while I'm alive." But he doesn't look disappointed. He's smiling.

My pulse quickens and I feel an electric tingle course through my body, waking every cell. "So… does this mean we can…"

His eyes are deep, black pools as he stares down into mine, and I swear I can see his soul. Then they flash and he nods. He leans down to kiss me, and, as we sink into the sheets, into each other, I know this can't be wrong.

LUC

I didn't know it was possible to feel like this. I kiss her and feel my new flesh-and-blood heart expanding right out of my chest, filling me with indescribable bliss.

We can be together-really together.

Her hands start on the button of my jeans, and I wish for the ability to just magic our clothes away.

But that was my old life. No… not a life at all. Just an existence. I wrap my arms around Frannie and pull her closer. This is living.

I pull back and look at her, sure I've never seen anything so beautiful. She closes her eyes as I trace a finger along her eyebrow and down her nose, but just as my finger reaches her lips, her eyes snap open and her features twist in pain. "NO!" she gasps, bolting upright. I feel her terror just as if it was my own.

Her face is ashen as she rolls and vomits into the trash can next to the bed. She sits and hugs her knees to her chest. "Me…" Her whisper is barely audible.

I pull myself up and sit next to her. "What is it? What did you see?"

"He's coming," she says, her voice strangled. Then she's off the bed like a shot, pulling on her shirt.

"Who?" I say, struggling to keep up. I slide my feet onto the floor and button my jeans. "Who's coming, Frannie?"

The room starts swirling, and then Gabriel is there, all human pretense gone. He hovers just off the floor in his flowing white robes, and I see Frannie's terror mirrored in his eyes.

Matt appears next to him. "He's coming."

And then, like a wrecking ball, some unseen force hits Frannie, lifting her off the ground and throwing her hard into the wall. Matt dives for her, but he's too late. She slides into a heap on the floor.

"Frannie!" My legs have me across the room and over her crumpled form in a flash, and when I pull her into my arms, I see the steam start to rise off her skin. She's a thousand degrees. "Frannie!" I say again, shaking her. Then she opens her eyes and I understand.

They're glowing red.

"Lucifer," she says in a voice that's hers but not, "who's got the prize now?"

"No!" I hear my voice as if from a great distance as rage nearly rips me in half.

"Beherit!" Gabriel's voice vibrates through me. "You can't do this. You have no claim."

"Oh, but I can… am, actually." Frannie's lips pull into a sinister

grin. "I've got special orders from the king Himself. Anything goes."

I hold Frannie and, as I look into those glowing eyes, I know the game is over. If King Lucifer wants her so much he's willing to throw all the rules to the wind, I'm not sure even the Almighty could save her.

I can't give up.

I look at the crucifix dangling from the chain around her neck. Gold. I yank it from her neck and raise it above her.

But Matt grabs my wrist. He glares at me and rips the crucifix out of my grasp. And he's right. I can use it to drive Beherit out, but at what cost?

She starts to pull free of me, and I let her. But then, by instinct, I reach for her hand, holding it in a death grip. Frannie is still in there, and a desperate piece of me needs to stay connected. She pulls herself to her feet, seeming taller, and turns to look me in the eye.

"How quaint, Lucifer. But you two are well past the hand-holding stage, don't you think?" She grabs my face and pulls me into a hard kiss. But it's not Frannie, it's Beherit, and I feel tendrils of his essence start to work their way through my lips.

As I pull back, she gasps loudly and her face screws tight as a strangled "no" works its way up from her depths. Gabriel sweeps her out of my arms and into his. He cradles her in one arm and draws a circle on her forehead with the index finger of the other as he whispers something I can't make out.

Her eyes snap open, still glowing red, and her face pulls into a grimace. "Good luck with that, Gabriel."

As asinine as it is, I find myself jealous that Gabriel can actually do something other than just stand here staring, and I have to fight the urge to rip her out of his arms.

"A fighter, this one," she says in a strained voice distinctly not hers.

"Fight him, Frannie," I say, reaching for her hand.

Her face twists with effort. "I want you out." Her voice is little more than a whisper, but it's hers. Her body writhes in Gabriel's arms. He lowers her to the bed, and I pull her into my arms, sending her all my strength.

"That's it, Frannie," Gabriel says. "You have the power. Use it."

The flood of hope overwhelms me. Sway. Frannie has Sway. If she fights-if she wants it enough…

"You don't want to be in here." Her voice is stronger, and when her eyes open, there's only a glowing ring around the irises. "You don't… want me," she growls.

She continues to writhe with the internal struggle for control then suddenly goes still, as if one of them has given up the fight. I gaze into

her eyes, panicked nearly to the point of insanity. "Frannie?"

Her eyes roll back for a moment, and a moan starts from deep inside her, growing in intensity. Her face becomes red and her eyes bulge. There's a flash of red energy, and she jerks then goes limp.

Breathing back the panic, I cradle her to my chest. "Frannie? Can you hear me?" She finally looks up at me with clear blue eyes-still scared, but lucid.

"He's gone," she says with a weary smile. I take a few deep breaths to slow my hammering heart then lean down and kiss her.

FRANNIE

I squeeze Luc's hand where he sits next to me as I lie on the bed.

"You did good. Your Sway is getting stronger," he says.

I'm still shivering and my teeth chatter. "Why can I only remember a little of what happened?"

"You may only remember the parts when you were in control."

"I feel like someone ran over me with a bus. Why didn't it feel like this with you?"

"Well, I didn't pick you up and throw you into the wall, for starters," Luc says. He and Gabe exchange a look, and Luc shoots him a vindictive smile. "But I guess it's different when you've invited the demon in."

Matt drops into the desk chair and glares at Luc.

Gabe looks at me with a rueful smile. I shrug, not sure what to say, but then a shiver racks me again and I feel nauseous. Out of the blue the tears start, and I'm helpless to stop them. "I'm not going to have a life, am I?" I say between the sobs.

Luc pulls me tightly to him, but he doesn't answer.

Gabe stands in my door and just stares at me. "Nobody knows the future, Frannie. Everything that happens changes everything else. But the deal is, you're valuable to both sides. The chance that you'll be able to get through this untagged is pretty much none. And once you're tagged-either way-you can be manipulated. I'm obviously not all that objective, but if someone was going to be jerking me around, I'd rather it wasn't Hell."

My heart is so heavy. I know what needs to happen, what I need to do, but… "How do I forgive myself for the worst thing I've ever done? The worst thing anyone's ever done?"

"Start by remembering what really happened." Matt glides to the foot of the bed and sits. Luc untangles himself from me and moves to the door with Gabe, giving Matt and me some space. "I fell because I was trying to climb too fast. It was my fault."

My throat tightens as I remember it. "No. I grabbed your ankle. I was mad, and I pulled you out of the tree."

"Stop it. You've been beating yourself up for so long. It wasn't your fault. You need to let it go." He wraps me in his arms, and I sit like that for what feels like forever.

"I just wanted you back," I finally say.

He smiles. "You have me."

My heart feels so heavy. "Not really. You're still dead."

"You're right. I don't have the life I would have had if?I hadn't fallen out of the tree, but that doesn't make why I'm here any less

important to me. And it doesn't make my dying any more your fault."

He looks at me for a long time, and I don't know what to say. Finally he says, "Gabriel says you need to forgive yourself, or we can't protect you." A smile turns the corners of his lips. "You gotta do it, Frannie. I can't blow my first gig because of an uncooperative client. It wouldn't bode well for the rest of eternity."

"I can't-"

His smile is gone as he cuts me off. "He says you have to figure out why you can't let go of the guilt."

"Because…" I fight tears as I pull his journal from under the mattress. I think of all my conversations with Matt in this book. All the things I told him so that he could have a little piece of me-my life. How I needed to keep him alive in my heart. "I needed it to keep from forgetting. I needed to hate myself 'cause the pain kept it fresh. It kept part of you alive."

All of a sudden I'm sure I'm going to throw up. There's something inside of me that my body needs to get rid of. "How do I do this? Let it go?"

"It's okay to feel sad about it, but you have to let go of the guilt. It has to come from inside. You need to remember what really happened."

I rest my forehead on my knees and close my eyes, waiting for the nausea to stop, but it only gets stronger as I relive the scene in my head. Matt climbing, his foot slipping. I screw my eyes tighter and groan as he falls. In my mind, I see my hand grab for him, but all I catch is his sneaker, and it comes off in my hand. I hear my scream as he hits the ground.

My eyes snap open, and I roll and dry heave over the trash can. Matt's arms are around me, and he pulls me to his shoulder, where I sit and shake.

Finally, I lift my head and look at him, tears streaking my cheeks. "Why'd you have to fall?"

He shrugs.

I'm not surprised by how mad I feel, but I am surprised when I realize I'm mad at him. I push away. "You should have slowed down-been more careful."

He nods. "But there was nothing you could do. It was an accident."

I drop my face into my hands and breathe back the anger. When my shaking slows, I pick the journal up off the bed and press it to my forehead, then hold it out to him. "I did this for you… or more for me, I guess. All along, you've been the only person I could really talk to."

He takes it from my hand and smiles. "I've been talking back. Did you hear me? Told you to stay away from him," he says, glancing

toward Luc.

My heart sinks. "Why do you hate Luc so much?"

"Why? You're kidding, right? He almost got you killed, Frannie. He's one of them."

"He's one of me," I correct, my voice raised.

Luc and Gabe stop whispering and look at us. Luc steps forward, concern on his face. "He's entitled to his opinion, and he's got good reason to think the way he does. I did almost get you killed… more than once."

"No. That would be me that almost got you killed," I remind him.

Matt looks at Luc, his expression still sour. "I hate the thought of you anywhere near her, and if you hurt her-in any way-I'll kill you myself."

Luc nods, holding Matt's eyes with his. "Duly noted."

Luc turns and looks hard at Gabe, and I know he's thinking the same thing as I am. Gabe said Matt was the best angel for this job, but I'm starting to wonder.

Matt softens his posture and leans his forehead into mine. His voice is low, meant just for me. "Frannie, I'm having a really hard time with this. Are you sure? About Luc, I mean? I just can't make myself trust a demon, no matter what Gabriel says."

"I'm sure, Matt. He loves me. Can't you just read his mind? Then you'd see."

"Sorry, I'm not high enough up the food chain for that particular skill. Dominions or higher."

"Please, just give him a chance."

His eyes harden again as he glances toward Luc, but then he pulls me into a hug, and I hear the smile in his voice. "You're not gonna pull that Sway crap on me, are you?"

I smile into his shoulder. "That depends entirely on you."

LUC

I watch Frannie with Matt as I stand in the door with Gabriel, and I know this is it. Talk to me outside, I think, and he nods and slips through the door with me into the hall.

"She's ready," I say.

"Yep."

"Tell me you'll take care of her. The look in Michael's eyes…" I shudder.

Gabriel leans into the wall. "We've got her backside, which is pretty nice." He quirks a smile.

"Can you be serious for like two minutes?"

He scowls at me. "Fine. Stop stressing. The Almighty knows she's special. And remember, Moses's life didn't suck. She'll be fine. She's not going anywhere."

"But she's not staying with me either. I just need to know she'll be okay before I let her go."

His eyes hold mine, and his jaw clenches as he contemplates that. "I'm not going to pretend that nothing's going to change, but what happens from here is up to Frannie. You're not a demon anymore. You're human, with a clean soul and a completely clean slate. If Frannie still wants you," he almost seems to choke on the words, "then there's no reason you can't be together."

And that's the key: if she still wants me. She'll belong to Heaven. To Gabriel. Will she still want me after? Her life will outgrow me-the tagalong, used-to-be demon. It won't be long before she doesn't need me or want me. I crack open the door and gaze at her. She looks so tired, but she also looks at peace, and I know it's time.

Gabriel pushes through the door, and I walk behind him, stopping just inside. But then Frannie holds her hand out to me, and I stride to her side, needing to feel her touch.

"You're ready," I tell her, and she nods her affirmation. "Good," I say to myself. "This is good," I repeat a little louder-for her. Then I kiss her quickly and stand.

I turn to Gabriel. "Okay," I say, giving him the signal.

He smirks. "Okay, what?"

"Tag her. She's ready."

"It was done before we walked back into the room. What'd you think, we have some big "Pomp and Circumstance" thing?"

I glower at him. "You're such an asshole. I thought maybe you'd give her a heads-up, that's all."

"If she's ready, why does she need a heads-up?"

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here," she says, glowering up

at us.

"Should I have given you a heads-up, Frannie?" Gabriel teases.

Frannie grins. "No, but maybe Luc would have liked one."

I start and stare down at her. "What are you talking about?"

Frannie's eyes are brighter than I've ever seen them. "Tag-you're it!"

I look at Gabriel, stunned. "You're joking."

He smiles and shrugs. "It was one of Frannie's conditions. Plus, you've impressed the right deity, though Michael was less than thrilled."

I try to digest what Gabriel is saying. "I'm tagged… for Heaven…" I say, trying it on.

"Could you at least pretend to be happy about it? Otherwise, I may have to take it back."

I feel the grin spread across my face as Frannie reaches up for my hand. I grab it and sit down hard in the desk chair next to the bed. "Holy shit."

Matt cracks a dubious smile. "You can say that again. A demon tagged for Heaven…" He shakes his head.

"So, what's going to happen?" Frannie asks. "I mean with my life… college and all…" her gaze shifts for an instant to me then back to Gabe, "… you guys."

Gabriel sits next to her on the bed and grasps her other hand, visibly struggling with what to say. But his eyes say what he can't. I see it, clear as day, even if she doesn't. He'd give up his wings for her. All she'd have to do is ask.

His eyes drop from hers, but his hand grasps tighter. "What happens from here is up to you."

Chapter 24

Charles The white light of a winter afternoon, coupled with the blast of frigid air, brought water to Charles's eyes, and he blinked for a moment. The strong hand on his upper arm guided him quickly through the open door as he was passed from one Machtvolk guard to another.

He looked out over the snow-covered forest, his eyes taking in the smoke of a hundred fires and the scattering of buildings that punctuated the foothills of the Dragon's Spine.

If this doesn't work, he thought, I could be dead by nightfall.

He'd spent the first two days hidden with the mechoservitors and the book. He had met Garyt just hours after they'd arrived, when the loyalist guard brought the latest of Winters's dreams, adding them to the most recent volume of the Book of Dreaming Kings. And as soon as the man had left to find food and water for Charles, the old arch-engineer busied himself reading the book while the mechoservitors continued sharing data in code. That first night-or perhaps it was day-he'd slept with a full stomach from cold roast chicken and small potatoes fried in salt and fat with dried onions. The bread had still been warm and the water was ice cold and sweet.

In the morning, he'd made his decision. The mechoservitors had resisted, as he'd expected, but in the end they had no other choice but to let him go. They needed their missing pages, and they could not leave the cave. Charles would elicit help from Rudolfo's Gypsy Scouts.

Now, he stood outside for the first time in weeks. He felt the wind on his face and took in a great lungful even as Garyt pulled at him. "We need to move quickly," he said.

Charles nodded and followed the guard. The dirty woolen and fur clothes stunk in his nostrils and made his skin crawl. He tried to ignore both. He kept his head down, feeling the bits of wood in his beard as they tickled his neck. It had taken them an hour to get him ready, applying the mud and ash to every inch of his body and then dressing him carefully in the clothes Garyt had brought.

They walked past log structures that looked new, and immediately Charles noted the crowd. Through the trees, he could just make out the bright canvas of large pavilion-style tents-liberated he suspected from the papal summer palace. "There are a lot of people gathering here," he said in a low voice.

"Mass of the Falling Moon," Garyt said. "One of their high holy days. There will be a ceremony tonight followed by three days of feasting."

Charles smiled. A good time to hide a crazy old man.

They moved along the edges of the larger pockets of people, with Garyt steering them away from the uniforms that Charles saw interspersed among the crowd. They picked their way carefully across the more populated areas near the larger wood structures and climbed a trail that took them behind a round building made of stone. They left the trail when they were out of eyeshot of any others, and Garyt kept them moving quickly.

When they were deep in the woods, Garyt paused. "You're certain of this?"

Charles looked up. "I am."

He'd learned about the Watcher yesterday. He'd surprised the man with his question when the guard brought him a second meal. And Charles had known the moment he asked that the man knew something about it. Still, beyond eventually acknowledging its existence, Garyt had said very little else about it despite the questions. But he had finally agreed to take him to Aedric.

Not that Charles knew exactly what he would ask of the first captain of Rudolfo's scouts. The missing pages, according to both Isaak and the other metal man, were vital for the salvation of the light. Somehow, they had to wrest them from their mechanical guardian or-if fate was kind-search the caves that Garyt claimed it lived in while it was away on some other business. Charles hoped for the latter, because if they were truly facing one of those ancient artifacts from the days of the Younger Gods, the gypsy scouts would be no match in an open confrontation.

And Charles knew better than to believe it could be reasoned with. Not a mechanical that operated on faith. Of course, it wasn't so very different from his metal men and the dream they believed in and acted on behalf of.

He felt the strain of their quick walk in his legs now and noticed that the snow had let up. Overhead, beyond the canopy of frozen evergreens, he saw that the midmorning sky was clearing as northern winds pushed the clouds away. Even with all that time in the Beneath Places, his muscles protested the effort.

They'd not gone much farther when a low whistle brought Garyt to a halt. Charles started at the sudden sound and stumbled, catching himself. He looked around the clearing and saw the slightest shimmer, heard the slightest whisper of footprints as they materialized in the snow.

"Hail, Garyt," he heard a voice call out. "And you as well, Androfrancine, though you are a long way from home."

Charles noted that the direction of the words changed even as they were uttered. "Hail, Aedric. How are the others?"

"They bide well," he answered. "We'll see him safe back to your

care, Garyt."

Garyt inclined his head and looked at Charles. "Be cautious, old man."

Charles nodded. "I will."

He watched the man jog south and west, then turned his attention back into the clearing.

"So." Now the voice was closer, and Charles could make out one eye, barely visible, just inches from his face. "Garyt tells me you are inquiring after a certain metal man."

Charles nodded. "It has something we require urgently."

"We?"

"I am here with Isaak," he said. "He is hidden with the Book of the Dreaming Kings. Pages have been removed from it with precision only a mechoservitor could produce. I'm told one lives in the woods and your men have encountered it." He paused as he realized what he was about to say. Perhaps I do know what to ask of Aedric, he realized.

"I need you to take me to it," Charles said.

"It is out of the question," Aedric said. "Aye, there is a metal man. It's been monitoring and altering our birds. It killed two of my men-cut them, bled them first and then sent their folded uniforms back with Lady Tam after serving her tea. She's left clear orders that we're not to approach the Watcher." He could hear awe bordering on fear in the man's voice. "It's like nothing we've seen before."

Watcher. Charles noted the name. "I need to find the pages it cut from the book."

"The Marsher book?" Aedric asked.

Charles nodded. "Yes. What they need from it is missing. Without them, they cannot complete their antiphon."

His own words surprised him. He heard faith there, and it frightened some part of him that remembered his vows as an acolyte of P'Andro Whym. I shall eschew all but the light and trust reason as my truest guide. And yet, some other part of him responded to the faith in his metal children and the risks they took for the dream they claimed to share. He did not know what the pages were for; he did not even know what the antiphon was, other than a response to their dream. But something in him cried out that it was true and that it was important for him to assist them.

Perhaps, he thought, because it was what fathers did to satisfy the hopes of their children.

"This is Marsher mysticism," Aedric said. He nodded to the northeast. "Yon Watcher is real and deadly. Evil, even, if such a thing may be. I'll not risk your life or the lives of my men for nonsense."

Charles felt the anger starting in his scalp. He tried to force it from his voice but was not successful. "It is not for you to decide,

Captain. Bear word of this to Lady Tam. Tell her what I have told you. Do not tell her that only Charles asks it of her but that Isaak does as well, for it is his dream that these missing pages serve."

There was silence. Finally, Aedric spoke. "I will consult with Lady Tam. Wait here until I return."

Charles opened his mouth to protest, and a cold wind brushed his cheek.

He waited for a minute. "Hello?"

No answer.

After another five minutes, he found a tree and squatted against it, facing the direction Aedric and Garyt had run in.

As he sat, his mind played out every possible scenario he could envision with this Watcher, gathering questions as he went and turning them over and over like the dials and catches of a Rufello lock in his mind. How old was it? Had it truly fallen with the first Wizard King? Had it risen from some temporary grave in the Beneath Places? He sat and pondered until he grew numb from the cold.

Standing, he looked above and realized at least two hours had passed.

Where are you, Aedric?

The man should've been back an hour earlier. Unless, Charles thought, he'd been delayed. Or something had gone wrong. For a moment, he thought about making his way back to the gathering crowd. With all of the activity, he should be able to make his way unnoticed back to the double doors that led into the caverns. Then he remembered something.

No. I'll not go back.

Smiling grimly, Charles turned to the northeast and began walking in the direction Aedric had nodded. Yon Watcher is real and deadly, the first captain had told him.

Charles suspected that soon enough he would know this firsthand, and prayed that his children's faith would protect him in his hour of need. Winters The woman in the mirror surprised Winters and she stepped back, her mouth falling open. She'd never comprehended southern women and their vanities, spending most of her life dressed in ragged, cast-off clothing and rarely caring whether that clothing was meant for the body of a male or a female. Now, in the dress that Ria had left for her, with her hair carefully braided by hands more skilled than her own, she did not think it was truly her own face and body reflected back at her.

She turned, noting the way the soft fabric clung to curves she was only just becoming accustomed to, and then glanced to the dressing room door.

"How does it fit, Winters?" It was Ria's voice, sounding bemused.

She looked again at the long blue dress with its low neckline and laced sleeves. "It fits… well," she said.

"Well?" her sister asked.

Winters turned and opened the door. Ria wore a similar dress, only hers was in a deep burgundy the color of pooling blood. Her face had been painted in the Machtvolk custom, though tonight there were less greens and more grays and blacks and whites. Still, each color was laid to her skin with precision, interlocking with the others like pieces to a puzzle. The paints covered her face, her neck and even her cleavage, the colors darkening where they intersected with the raised scar tissue that peeked out from the mark of Y'Zir her dress mostly concealed. Her own brown hair was up, offset by a silver tiara that Winters had not seen before.

Ria stepped back to take her in and then frowned. "I could paint your face," she said. "There is still time."

Winters shook her head. "I'm certain you have better things to do with your time, sister."

Ria nodded. "I do. We've a special guest tonight that I should see to. Someone I hope will answer some of those questions of yours I've not been able to answer." She moved toward the door, her bare feet shushing the carpet. "Your boots and robes are by the main entrance. Meet Lady Tam and the others there at the fourth bell and my guards will bring you to me. We'll walk to the amphitheater together."

Winters nodded. She'd used it-or rather Hanric had-for those rare times that large groups of her people gathered. It was really nothing more than a valley nestled up against the mountain, the downward slopes logged of lumber, with the stumps left as places where people could sit. She'd seen them clearing the snow from it for days in preparation for tonight and knew that even now, bonfires were being set across its wide floor to provide at least some warmth for those able to huddle nearby. Most would rely upon their furs and the warmth of their companions.

Ria paused at the door and smiled. "I am glad you are here for this, Winters." Her eyes took on a concerned look. "I had thought when I returned to take my throne that I might lose a sister I had never truly had. I'm glad to be wrong."

Winters felt something cold in her stomach but forced herself to curtsy. "Thank you, Ria."

The woman returned the curtsy and let herself out. Winters forced herself to count to ten before she released her breath. "Pig shite," she whispered.

"I'm glad," a voice from the corner said, "you also see it as such."

It took her a moment to place it. "Aedric?"

The voice moved. "Aye."

She blushed. "How long have you been hiding in my room?"

The first captain chuckled. "I've kept my eyes averted, Lady Winteria. Rudolfo's scouts are gentlemen at the very least; we only look when asked to."

She felt the heat in her cheeks, nonetheless. She went to the dressing room and brought out its lamp, placing it on the desk. "I thought your secret meetings were exclusively with Lady Tam."

"We've a new development. One I am quite late returning to." The voice was low, muffled with the same magicks that concealed him. "Your sister isn't the only one with special guests. Charles and Isaak are here. I've left the old gray robe in the wood; he seeks pages missing from your Book and believes the Watcher has them."

"The Watcher?"

"Lady Tam will tell you more when she can. He's a metal man the likes of which we've never seen. A leftover of the Younger Gods, I'll wager, dug up from their graveyards beneath the ground. Charles and Isaak believe he's taken pages from your book. Pages required for their work of saving the light. Lady Tam sent me to inquire what you might know of this matter."

Winters was certain her face had already betrayed her. Charles and Isaak are here? And inquiring after the missing pages? She turned in the direction that Aedric's voice last came from and swallowed. "Yes," she said. "I know of it. It was what the other mechoservitors told me when Garyt took me to them."

"And these pages-do you say they are critical to save the light as well?"

She thought about this. "I do not know about the light," she said. "But I know they are the path Home for my people, Captain, and a part of the dream the mechoservitors serve, part of the dream I serve."

"The one that names your boy, Nebios, Homeseeker?"

She nodded. "Yes."

She heard Aedric sigh. "Then let's hope that even Y'Zirite metal men celebrate their so-called Moon Mass." His voice moved near now, and his face took shape before her, shimmering and faint in the lamplight. "I will do what I can to find these pages."

The sudden thought of a metal man attending the mass piqued her curiosity. Ria had mentioned a guest who could answer her questions, and she wondered if this might be that guest. She shook away the thought at Aedric's next words. "Open the door for me, Lady Winteria. It's time for me to go."

She did, stepping into the hall and calling out to a servant who was going someplace quickly, her arms full of coats. "When you are finished," she said, "I would like some tea, please." She felt the slightest wind on her exposed feet and ankles as Aedric moved away

down the hall.

The girl nodded and continued on; Winters went back into her room and closed the door.

She walked to her bed and sat upon it.

Do I still want to go through with this? Charles and Isaak were here now. And Aedric was now involving his Gypsy Scouts. Still, the missing pages were only a part of what compelled her toward action tonight. She'd asked for her voice magicks before she'd even known about the final dream. She'd asked for them once she'd started dreaming again, once she'd seen the wrongness of the path her people were being led down.

She looked to her knives where they hung from their belts on the back of the wooden desk chair. Then, she looked back to the bed. She stood and then crouched down, stretching her hand underneath the mattress until it found the small phial. She held it and stared at it, remembering the last time she'd tasted the sour contents that fueled her announcement of ascension to the Wicker Throne. And later, those contents had let her preach her first War Sermon, compiled of glossolalia and the scattered images of her family's long Homeward dream.

Walking to the mirror, she saw her dim reflection now within it.

Such a girl now. No, she realized, a woman.

She'd much rather go to this in her ragged trousers and tunic, her hair braided in bones and sticks, her face washed with the ash of desolation, the mud of a land that rejected her people and cast them into sorrow. She'd rather face this moment with the knives that her friend had taught her to dance with.

She placed the phial between her breasts and pushed it to the right, adjusting both breast and phial until the one covered the other. She would have to find a safe moment to drink the magicks.

Then, she would have to find the words that needed to be said to her people and to the woman who had stolen them from her.

Wolves in the fold, Winters thought, and wondered if she would be as strong as the hero Jamael when the time came. Jin Li Tam The song rose in a cloudless sky the color of slate and speckled with the few swollen stars that were visible by day. Jin Li Tam held Jakob close, hidden in a sling beneath her fur robes, his tiny face peeking out. It was a cold evening, made colder still by the chills the Y'Zirite hymns brought to her skin. She glanced to Winters where she walked beside her and then to Lynnae on her other side. All three of them had been provided gowns and fur robes. They were walking now on wooden planks that had been hammered together to create a path above ground going muddy from those who'd walked it before.

They'd left the lodge in a large throng of people that she assumed

were Ria's elite. Those who had helped her wrest power from her younger sister, those who had seeded the Y'Zirite resurgence in secret. She and her party walked close to the front, where the Machtvolk queen led the procession, accompanied by a robed figure who had joined them late as they gathered by the front door.

Now, they approached the natural amphitheater and Jin saw the light of a hundred fires and heard the hymn as it built to a crescendo. It was not the song she had first heard, but similar, and the words within it took her back to the war that had raged in her since the meeting with the woman claiming to be her sister.

When the regent bids you come, go with him. The boy will be safe in Y'Zir.

Her child was their messiah somehow, in conjunction with their Crimson Empress. The world's healing was in their hands, according to the gospels she'd read. And if the magicked woman in her room spoke true, somewhere beyond the Named Lands lay a place bearing the name of their faith-a place she was intended to go to with her son for some purpose yet to be revealed. Initially, she'd been convinced it was a trap. But the more she thought about it, the more she saw that it seemed the direction gravity pulled her toward. Truly, there had been a great conspiracy within the Named Lands, fueled and funded by a branch of her family with help from this Watcher. An enemy greater than these pulled the puppet strings, and the opportunity to get closer to that enemy was nothing to be taken lightly.

And there is no safe place in the Named Lands. Not unless she was prepared to live here with the Machtvolk. The conspiracy had done a good job of assuring that none of the nations of the Named Lands could trust her family or Rudolfo.

The music changed as they drew closer, and they carefully picked their way down a crowded slope, moving slowly. As they went, she felt tentative hands reach out to touch her, and she forced herself not to cringe from it. She brought her arms up over Jakob by instinct.

They reached the bottom of the slope and climbed wooden steps onto a platform where two dozen chairs sat in a ring around a large wooden cutting table. An elaborate system of catch trays was fastened to it, all feeding into a single pipe that fed a silver basin. Nearby, Jin saw a table with silver knives laid out upon it beside a bowl of white powder she assumed must be cutting salts. Over the past several days, she'd heard much about tonight's mass, but this was an unexpected aspect. Though in hindsight Jin wasn't sure why she'd not anticipated it.

Someone is going to be cut tonight.

They stood before their chairs. At first, she thought they waited for Ria, but she realized that the Machtvolk queen watched the robed

man who joined them. When he sat, Ria did the same, and the rest of them followed.

Jin leaned forward, still unable to see the man's face, but she noted his hands. They were white and large, laced with scars that reminded her of the marks that her father bore, cut into him by Ria during his time in captivity. Whoever he was, he'd arrived late in the night and had been hidden away quickly. The shimmering forms that she glimpsed from the corner of her eye told her that he was accompanied by magicked scouts.

A handful of her own scouts had accompanied her, and she wondered how the others fared. She'd sent Aedric to Winters, and the fact that he hadn't returned told her that the girl had confirmed the missing pages and Isaak's need of them. By now, surely the first captain had reached the caves, gambling that its metal occupant was attending the night's event.

She looked around the crowd again. If the Watcher was here she could not see him; but there were thousands crowded into this space now, and if he was robed, she might never pick him out.

Still, she kept looking for him even after Ria stood and sipped from a phial she held in her ungloved hand. When she cleared her voice to speak, the sound of it rolled like thunder out over the valley and into the surrounding hills. "May the grace of the Crimson Empress be with you," she said.

Their response rose up, half a cheer and half a reply. "And also with you," a multitude of voices answered. One of them was the firm, confident voice of the robed man who sat near her.

"Behold," Ria said, "the falling moon!" As she said it, the first blue-green light of it rose up on the horizon. "Tonight, we celebrate the salvation it brought us in this-our first open celebration of the mass here in the land of our sojourn." She paused, the roar of her words echoing out into the forests for league upon league, blending now with the wild cheers of the faithful. Then she turned, pointing toward Jin. "And behold, even our Great Mother attends, bearing the Child of Great Promise."

The cheer was deafening, and she felt her face grew hot. Her eyes met Ria's, and behind the adoration she saw there was something else, something off-putting. Was it defiance? She couldn't be certain. Forcing her eyes away, she inclined her head.

Nestled close to her in his harness, Jakob laughed.

The Machtvolk queen spoke for nearly an hour, her voice rising in passion then dropping low and reassuring as she spoke of their home and their faith. Jin followed what she could but found herself focused instead upon the gathered crowds. Twice she saw uniformed soldiers wrestling individuals to the ground to drag them from the valley. And

at least once, she thought she'd seen a tall, robed figure moving along the ridgeline above them.

She also watched the robed man, catching glimpses of a scarred jawline or of a crimson cuff beneath his fur robes. She could distinguish his voice from the others now, and it carried with it an accent she could not place at first.

It is familiar to me. Her sister Ire Li Tam had also spoken with an accent.

To her right, she heard Winters shuffle, and she glanced at her. The young woman's face was drawn tight, and she bit her lower lip with her eyes closed. She looks pained. Or in prayer.

Jin leaned over. "Are you okay?"

The girl nodded but did not speak.

They were singing again, and when they finished, Ria turned to the robed man. "We are honored by another guest," she said, passing over the phial to him. "He has come a long way to bear tidings of our empress. Tonight, he honors us by making the cuts of healing upon our proxy."

The robed man stood and cast off his hood to reveal a scarred and pale face beneath close-cropped silver hair. He looked first over the crowd and then turned to meet the eyes of the others he shared the platform with.

"I am pleased," Ria said, "to present to you Blood Regent Eliz Xhum."

The man stepped forward, and when he spoke, his voice was warm, inviting, even as it blasted out from him. "Greetings," he said with a wide smile. "It is good to see the Machtvolk on the edge of their new home." The crowd roared at this. He turned slowly as they did, and his smile widened even farther, though Jin was not certain how it could. "It is good to see you at last, Jin Li Tam, Great Mother of Jakob, our Child of Promise. I've awaited your coming for many years now, as have all of us in Y'Zir."

She met his eyes and found them disarming for that briefest moment before he looked away.

"I am honored to worship with you tonight," he said as he outstretched his hands. "And this mass shall be your last without a home. Even now, the places are set to the table and the feast is soon coming. Even now-"

But another sound interrupted him, and Jin looked to the right, startled by it. Another clearing of the voice like thunder, and she saw that Winters stood now, her face suddenly a hard mask.

"Oh my people," Winters cried out, "heed not the lie of wolves in our fold. The dreams of the House of Shadrus are clear. Our home is not here for us to take but rather"-she raised a finger and pointed to

the sky-"it is there for us to seek."

Jin Li Tam followed her finger, saw the moon to which she pointed, and then looked back to the girl. Her hands moved quickly though Winters didn't pay her any mind. What are you up to? Already, uniformed men moved toward her, and Jin saw her own scouts slipping in closer.

Jin shot a glance to Ria and the regent. Ria's face was mottled purple in rage, but Eliz Xhum's face looked more bemused than anything.

"You surprise me, little sister," Ria said in a voice that dripped venom.

Winter raised her hands. "Hear me," she cried. "Our home arises, and our Homeseeker will bring us to it in the end. Do not lose your faith in our dream. Do not trade it for this late-coming lie." She held her copy of the gospel high above her head and then flung it.

Jin watched it as it tumbled out into the evening air to land within the closest fire. When it landed in the flames, she heard a thousand gasps.

Now, the approaching soldiers faced off with the Gypsy Scouts. Their hands were upon their knife handles as Jin Li Tam's fingers flew, issuing orders to them that they acknowledged with low whistles. "Stand down your men," she said over her shoulder to Ria.

"I'll not-"

But Ria's voice was cut off by the regent's. "Stand down," he said, and they did. When he spoke again, his tone was gentle. "Let us reason together," he said with a smile.

Jin Li Tam looked to the faith she saw upon Winters's face, bathed blue-green in the light of the moon, and then to the painted puzzle of Ria's face and the carved symbols that spiderwebbed Eliz Xhum's strong features.

Last, she looked to the face of her child, still laughing where he lay against her.

Whatever came next, Jin Li Tam doubted reason would have much to do with it.

Chapter 25

Neb For the longest time, they followed warm and winding corridors that gradually descended farther into the Beneath Places. Neb's metal guides ran ahead, the breath of their bellows and the hiss of released steam playing counterpoint to the whir of their gears and the mechanical pulse of their pumping legs.

He ran behind them, surprised at how easily he kept up with them. The deeper down they went, the warmer the air became, and from time to time, the phosphorescent glow faded to leave them moving forward only by the light of their amber eyes in that dark place. Neb used the time to collect his thoughts, giving up on the notion of any answers from them when they ignored his initial questions.

Still hollowed by all he'd learned, he found a numb detachment ran with him. In the span of days, he'd found his dead father very much alive and had discovered through the man's tearful confession that not only had Windwir's fall been permitted, but that the man he'd believed his sire was not. True or not, it unsettled him most when he remembered the voice that vibrated through his body as he lay suspended in the bargaining pool.

In those moments, his detachment threatened mutiny.

What kind of father could anyone possibly find here?

Even as he thought it, the whispering started ahead as they once more passed through a broad cavern containing yet another silver pool-this one gurgling in a slow-moving current that fled away out of view. He strained his ears but could not distinguish anything intelligible. Still, the whispering grew in volume the farther they ran.

At last, it stopped when they reached a tall archway with a crystalline door set into it. The first mechoservitor placed a metal hand upon its crimson surface, and the door whispered open. A gust of hot wind escaped the space behind it, and a soft blue-green light poured out with it. The metal men inclined their heads.

Neb heard the quietest hiss, and the whispering started up again. As they stepped back, he stepped into the archway and took in the room behind it. It was another pool, one he recognized as similar to the one he'd awakened in, only this one was in a carved basin. At its center, hanging from a web of silver threads, hung a blue-green orb the size of a bull's head.

No, Neb realized, not just an orb. Legs unfolded from it-legs also silver and easily mistaken for part of the web it hung from. The light undulated, bent through the thick, glasslike construction of the crystal that contained it. The legs twitched and moved along the strings, and

the whisper now was more obviously a song.

Neb's detachment failed now, and he felt fear grip him. He felt it like a cold fist squeezing his bladder, and as the spiderlike creature moved toward him, he stepped back. "What is it?"

A metal hand fell to his shoulder. "Wade in the waters," the metal man said. "You can only hear his voice if you are submerged in the pool."

Neb took a tentative step forward, then hesitated.

"This," the metal man said, his hand still firm on his shoulder, "is what the light requires of you, Nebios Homeseeker. A tremendous price has been paid to bring you to this moment. Do not be afraid."

He removed his boots slowly and pulled off his robe. Closing his eyes, he stepped into the pool, remembering the fear on the face of the Gray Guards when he'd nearly backed into the other pool. He felt the fluid moving over his feet, and the cool relief of it ran up his legs, soothing the ache from his run.

Yes.

He did not hear the voice as much as he felt it, and there was a calm in it that compelled him forward. He waded out to his waist and waited.

The silver legs unfolded, bearing the orb along the web as it moved closer to him. Smaller appendages-more slender than the legs-waved the air before it. Neb watched it approach. "Who are you?"

Come closer.

Neb took one step forward and then another. Now, the warm, thick liquid lapped at his chest. Beneath him, the floor of the pool felt spongy but solid. The smell of it was salty in his nose. He waited, watching as a tendril of webbing dripped from an orifice that appeared in the underside of the orb's silver chassis. The strand of web brushed the top of the pool, sending ripples out from the place it touched, and then the legs bore the orb along the line of the thread to hang inches above the pool and within reach of Neb.

He forced himself to stay put, feeling the vibration of the voice as it moved over his skin. They named you Nebios.

He closed his eyes and pushed his answer into a thought. Yes. Who are you?

He watched the light gutter and then pulse again through the thick crystal of the globe. I am a ghost of the first people, those this world was made for. A series of images came with the words now, and Neb found them disorienting. He saw a vast planet-sized garden, scattered crystalline towers reflecting back sunlight in the midst of orchards of fruit and fields of grain.

Neb's breath caught in his throat. "You are a Younger God."

I am the ghost of one. An echo left behind in hope with a pocket

full of seeds. And in you, Frederico's Bargain is finally complete. The path is cleared to the tower, and you will take back what Y'Zir the Thief had no right to. You are Homeseeker and Home-Sower.

More images, stronger now that the silver legs stirred the pool, took shape behind his eyes. Neb felt the power of them on his skin. A white tower-familiar to him-rose up from the jungle and he stood upon it, surrounded by metal men and their song, a silver staff held high in his hand as the sea boiled beneath him.

He could hear the song in the air now even as he felt it moving through the fluid that pulled at him, and the gravity of it tugged him. At first, he resisted, but finally he gave himself to it, took in a great lungful of air, and immersed himself. He felt the pool shift and move about him.

Yes. Neb didn't know if it was his voice or the voice of the Younger God. Maybe it was both in unison. Regardless, he felt a splash as the globe dropped into the pool beside him.

I have bargained for you as I promised. You are the last of my seed and the last of our people. Last of the line of Whym and last hope of Lasthome.

The words tumbled through his brain, rocks tossed into a well. The line of Whym? How could that be? He tried to collect and focus his thoughts to ask, but that level of control eluded him.

Scenes shifted around Neb now, and they were impossible to discern, storms of light and sound that moved through his mind with an ache that made him groan. He opened his mouth and felt the thick fluid pushing its way into him. It moved inside him now even as it moved over him, and he lost his footing.

Silver legs reached out to steady him, careful in their grip. For a moment, he resisted and floundered. Then, he relaxed. I do not understand.

I am the ghost of Whym. Three sons have I sent out from the basement of the world; only one has returned for my blessing. And so I give it freely: dominion over what was made for you. Your awakening will be gradual and heuristic. You will learn the path by following it. You will follow the path and save our people.

The spider's legs were tightening upon his wrists and drawing him in. His eyes were closed against the warm pool, but he forced them open to see that the silver waters were now a brilliant blue and green. He wanted to resist but found that he hung limp as the quicksilver carried him. He felt the legs encircle him and felt the heat of the globe against his chest.

Then, those smaller appendages moved over his face, sliding into his nostrils and his ears and open mouth. When the pain came, it was instant and hot and blinding. He felt his body seize from it, and in the

midst of the seizure, everything shifted to gray bordered by black.

As the world spun away, Neb heard and felt the voice once more. I give myself for you.

Then what had been light became darkness and what had been song became silence. Neb floated in it wrapped in a solitude deeper than he had ever known. And eventually, in the heart of that silence, a whispering arose. And in the core of that darkness, light bloomed and held.

When he emerged from the waters, the waters lifted him until he stood upon their mirrored surface. He ignored the empty crystalline husk with its limp silver legs. Instead, he fixed his eyes upon the metal men who waited on the shore. He knew them and he knew their song, knew the strands of it that connected them in the aether. He read the code in that canticle now and smiled at how simple it was.

"Time is of the essence," Nebios Whym said, and his words echoed through a room now lit only by the amber of their jeweled eyes. "The antiphon awaits."

Yes, a voice within him whispered. Vlad Li Tam The rocking of the ship and the rhythm of the words soothed Vlad Li Tam despite the nearby crowd of sailors. All hands were on deck now as his first grandson led some form of Y'Zirite service in the guttural tones of their language. There were songs, as well, and a long monologue with portions read from a black-bound book that Vlad suspected must be one of their gospels.

He found himself willing the service to continue, knowing that each minute that the lower decks were empty was time bought for his family to comb it for anything useful. The longer they were aboard, the higher the risk of discovery and capture. At some point, those stolen rations or tools or magicks would be noticed. They either had to take the ship-an unlikely feat-or escape it to something safer.

His grandson's voice dropped, and Vlad turned his attention back to him. The young man had raised his arms in supplication, a silver knife held high. The moon rose, and as it did, the waters took on an ethereal glow. Out on the waters, Vlad could make out other ships moving in slow, wide circles around them, and he noticed that they were now adrift in the center of the massive pillars. As the moon rose, he saw the light of it reflected in the silver orb that hung far above.

The setting, combined with the poetry of Mal Li Tam's voice, pulled at him. And from the looks of rapture on the faces of the crew, it compelled them as well. Two of them rolled barrels to the prow and another brought a plank. They laid the plank across the barrels.

What are they doing? But part of him already knew as his eyes followed the silver blade in his first grandson's hand.

He'd forced Myr to bring him back when the call had gone out for

all hands. Even now, she sat beside him, huddled up against the rail, not far from the hatch that would take them back to the part of the ship they called home. He felt her fingers pressing into his skin.

Do you understand any of this?

No, he tapped. But it fascinated him. Certainly, he'd heard stories about resurgences. And his family was very involved in this particular resurgence, though obviously with a great deal of help from outside. Help from people who bore the marks of Y'Zir not just upon their hearts but upon their entire bodies. He had no doubt it was faith that drove those blades into their skin.

Mal Li Tam was pacing now and speaking with an impassioned voice. He paused and pointed the knife first at one man and then at another. He even pointed it briefly toward one of the women in the party. But eventually, it was the man Vlad recognized as captain that stepped forward and offered a one-word answer.

Then, he stripped down and stretched himself upon the plank as his men tied his arms and ankles so that he was firmly fixed to the table it formed. Deck buckets were passed forward, and Vlad suddenly felt a stab of tension in his shoulder blades as he watched Mal salt the blade and roll up the sleeves of his robe.

The moonlight danced over the captain's scarred body. He did not struggle or even cry out as the knife made its first pass. But by the seventh stroke, he wept and screamed and his men wept and screamed with him as his blood dribbled into the buckets through holes drilled in the plank. When Mal finished, he cleaned the captain's wounds himself and then kissed him on the mouth, uttering a loud proclamation with hands outstretched toward the crew.

Then, lifting the bucket, he pitched its contents over the rail. Afterward, he called out loudly, his voice booming out over the sea and Vlad recognized the word once more. "Behemoth!"

The young man waited, and the deck became silent.

Vlad held his breath. Mal Li Tam tossed back his head and laughed loud. The crew joined him and even the captain, tears streaming down his face. Raising his gospel in one hand and his knife in the other, the Y'Zirite priest launched into another long monologue and at the end of it, laid aside his gospel to take the knife to his own hand. He drew the gash deep and held it out for them to see. Then, he cast his eyes upward, and Vlad followed his gaze. The silver orb eclipsed the moon, and for a moment, it was a globe of blue-green water speckled with stars.

He stretched out his hand beyond the railing and squeezed his blood into the ocean with a cry.

Vlad felt a tickle along the back of his neck and realized when Myr squirmed against him that he held her arm too tightly. He

released it.

Could it be so simple?

He heard it rising in the stillness of the wind, felt the faintest vibration of it in the deck beneath him as it moved through the deep waters. As it drew closer, it became a buzz and then a roar, and the sea heaved and bucked from it as it moved in a slow upward spiral toward them.

Already, Mal Li Tam was stripping off his robe and fixing the silver knife between his teeth. Around them, the crew raised a shout, and in the midst of that shout, Vlad made his choice.

With one hand, he slipped Myr's knife from her belt. With the other, he pressed words into her forearm. See the others to safety. You bear my grace.

It broke the surface off the starboard side of the bow, and he'd never seen anything like it. It was larger than a ship, long and made of a pitted metal that bent and flexed as it twisted through the water, gears grinding and shrieking as it moved. Dozens of jeweled eyes cast back the moonlight as it turned toward their ship.

Mal Li Tam leaped overboard from the prow with a loud cry.

Digging the edge of the knife into his own palm, Vlad Li Tam followed him. Rudolfo Rudolfo moved through the forest quietly, savoring the silence once he was far enough away from camp. Twice, he passed guard posts, whistling his intentions to them as he slipped by and into the deeper forest. At last, he reached a clearing with a tree he could lean against while watching the stars.

The meeting with Philemus had not gone well. He'd watched the man's face redden, and in the end Rudolfo had raised his voice to make his point clear. The second captain would follow his orders, but Rudolfo sensed a breaking point on the close horizon. The Gypsy Scouts were the pride of the Ninefold Forest, a fearsome fighting force, and reducing them to a type of state police did not sit well with anyone… especially among the officers. But word now sped south, and tomorrow, Philemus would follow the birds and return home to the Seventh Forest Manor. Tonight, Rudolfo needed to decide if he would ride with him. There was nothing here for him to do, and his epiphany held, the memory of it as fresh as the memory of the knife jarring his shoulder as he pressed it into the woman's heart.

We cannot win here. And still, he would find what path he could through what came. He had to. The face of his son, conjured up at each intersection, compelled him to find a way.

The forest was still but for the sound of overweighted branches losing their snow when the wind caught them just right. He stood and watched the moon and thought about the family that strengthened his resolve.

Over the past several months he'd found himself frequently asking himself what Jin Li Tam would do. And he'd grown accustomed to seeking her counsel late at night when they lay whispering in bed. Now, with her and Jakob so far away, he found he missed her words the most. The quiet and careful way she spoke them and the hard edge to those words when his stubbornness required it. Their pairing might have been a manipulation, but it was a formidable partnership nonetheless, and she'd proven this again and again.

We cannot win here.

The real enemy gathered strength and now made forays into the Named Lands with blood-magicked scouts who were capable of surviving the toll those magicks took upon their bodies. They were a hardy stock, well trained, and a brutal fighting force. And while this enemy built its own path, his own kin-clave to the south plotted against his family. His best intelligence couldn't touch the competence and ferocity of Ria's network, and his best ambassadors could not persuade even the opening of dialogue with any but Erlund, who was too distracted with political reform in the wake of his civil war to care much for what happened with the Ninefold Forest.

Rudolfo swallowed and wished for a moment he'd brought the firespice with him. He pushed the craving aside, alarmed at how quickly it had become a crutch he could limp along with.

The thought of limping brought Isaak to mind, and he wondered how his metal friend fared. By now, Isaak should be in the Marshlands with the others. Before Jin's coded note, Rudolfo had worried less. But knowing now that another metal man-this Watcher she spoke of-made his home there raised Rudolfo's hackles to third alarm. Whoever their enemy was, they did not want the mechanicals dreaming. And, more than that, they didn't want the Seven Cacophonic Deaths loose in the world. He did not doubt for a second that their call for him to release the mechoservitors into their care would ultimately lead to yet more light gone from the world.

Rudolfo sighed and tried to pull the stillness of the night into himself, tried to conjure images of his sleeping child.

He heard the man in the forest long before he saw him. The crunch of frozen snow, the labored breathing and the whispered curses were like shouts across an open plain.

Rudolfo remembered a time when Gregoric would follow him out into the woods. That first captain and closest friend always gave him plenty of time to think in the quiet, but inevitably, he turned up. That was a loss that still rode him hard.

Lysias broke into the clearing, bundled in furs and panting as he placed his boots in the prints Rudolfo had left behind. The old man looked around, clouds of steam rising from his mouth and nostrils as

he caught his breath.

Rudolfo whistled low and the general turned. As the man made his way to him, he noted his posture and stride. Whatever anger he bore had been burned off by the quick-paced walk. He nodded to Rudolfo.

"You've found me," Rudolfo said.

"The snow helps." Lysias took the tree next to him and leaned against it, still gulping his air.

Rudolfo said nothing, giving the man time to gather his thoughts and slow his heart rate and breathing. He waited for five minutes, and then Lysias finally spoke.

"It is quiet here," the general said.

Rudolfo nodded. "It is good for thinking." He'd known since boyhood how to woo a crowd, but it was from the quiet, still places that he drew his strength and found his paths.

Lysias's eyes narrowed in the moonlight. "And what are you thinking?"

Rudolfo took in a deep breath. "I'm thinking," he said in a slow voice, "that no matter what we do, we're damned and buggered. We build our army too late for a hunter that has set his snares and harried his prey too long." As he released those words, he felt their power on the wind and felt relief from finally having said them. "We cannot win here."

Lysias nodded. "You may be correct."

"And I am thinking," Rudolfo said, "that it may have been a mistake, killing the girl."

The old general nodded again. "It may have been. I think I could've broken her."

Rudolfo regarded him. "Perhaps," he said, "but I think it would've broken something in you. Some actions we take can do that."

Lysias chuckled. "You underestimate me, Lord. Those parts of me were broken a long time ago." He was quiet for a moment. "Still, she is dead and that is an unchangeable fact." He looked back to Rudolfo, and their eyes met. "At least," he said, "you took action."

Yes. "I hope it was the right action."

Lysias shrugged. "It felt right at the moment?"

"It felt…" Rudolfo let the words trail out. His answer troubled him. "It felt satisfying."

"Perhaps it was what you needed to find your path again."

Perhaps it was. But another part of him rebuked that inner voice. He let the quiet settle in again.

The sound of the bird was loud, and Rudolfo heard its shrill cries long before it settled onto a fallen log in the center of the clearing. His hand moved instinctively for his scout knife as it flapped the ice from

its wings.

It was larger than he'd imagined it would be up close. Its dead, glassy eyes stared, and even from a distance, he could smell the decay of it. The kin-raven hopped in place upon the log and opened its beak.

A voice leaked out. "Greetings, Rudolfo son of Jakob, lord of the Ninefold Forest. I am Eliz Xhum, regent of the Crimson Empress. Grace and peace to you from the Empire of Y'Zir." The voice paused, though the beak did not move. "Your father rejoiced at the coming of this day and bid me bear you his pride and love. He had longed to hold the Child of Promise in his arms but, alas, it was not the path set out for him."

Rudolfo felt the words even as he heard them. They were colder than the winter sky and sharper than knives. My father? He forced his attention back to the mottled dark messenger upon its log.

"I have been informed of the recent treachery against your family and can assure you that every step is being taken both for the prevalence of justice and the safety of the Great Mother and her Child of Promise. I regret the chaos and violence of the past two years and I regret the chaos yet to come, though I'm certain a time is coming when you will concur, as your father did before you, that this is essential for the healing of our world." There was a pause, and Rudolfo glanced to Lysias. The man listened intently with a look of understanding that grew to look more like alarm with every word. The voice continued. "My emissary will reach your western border by way of the Whymer Road in approximately one week's time. My eager hope is that they will be met with peace and welcome, and escorted safely to you that our strategy for a successful transition may be discussed. I look forward to our work together, Rudolfo."

The bird's beak closed, and Rudolfo did not hesitate. He drew his knife and flung it at the kin-raven even as its great wings spread. He'd not thrown in a goodly while, and he felt the strain of the sudden movement in his shoulder and arm. The knife went wide, missing by a span, and the bird lifted into the sky to shriek at him as it fled west.

Rudolfo cursed and walked to the log, recovering his knife. Lysias said nothing, and by the look on his face, Rudolfo could tell the older officer was trying to read him, to gauge this new information and its impact upon him.

My father. He did not believe it, of course. It wasn't possible. He'd watched his father ride out to put down resurgences in the name of the Pope. What was his role in this? The knots in his stomach were twisting now as his mind went back to the blood shrine they'd found in the forest. And the list of names, including some of his father's closest and most trusted friends.

Our strategy for a successful transition. He looked to Lysias.

"What do you make of it?"

"Invasion," the old general said. "And he would not tell you so much if he did not know already that there was nothing to be done for it."

Rudolfo nodded. "I hope you're wrong."

But he did not believe he was, any more than he believed this sudden fear he felt about his father was somehow misplaced. It answered too many questions.

In that moment, Rudolfo wept, and he felt rage and despair rising off of him like heat from a banked fire.

Chapter 26

Winters Somewhere in the crowd, an infant wailed and broke the silence that had taken hold of them. Winters looked out over the mass of people who had gathered beneath the rising moon, took in the cutting table and then turned her attention to the man who had just spoken.

When she answered him, her voice rolled out for league upon league. "There is nothing reasonable about your faith," she said. "You impose it. You force your mark. You press your gospels into the hearts of small children and teach it to them as if it were certain truth."

As she spoke, a smile played at the corners of Eliz Xhum's mouth. Something bright sparked in his eye. "And how is that any different from your Homeseeking Dream? Were you not taught as a child that eventually this Homeseeker would arise? Did you not cover yourself with ash and mud to remind you of sorrow and loss during your sojourn between homes?" The regent spoke slowly, his magicked voice a gentle thunder in the winter air. "And beyond matters of faith, your Androfrancines-soulless offspring of that deicide, P'Andro Whym-did they not also teach their view of things as if they were certain truth? To children? And did they not hold hostage an entire population to their atheistic convictions and their worship of human knowledge, hoarding that knowledge to themselves in their walled city, doling it out or withholding it at their whim?"

Winters glanced to Jin Li Tam. The woman watched her, her eyes betraying concern, as she shifted Jakob in her arms. Winters turned back to the regent. "As to the Androfrancines," she said, "my people have resisted them from the time they arrived upon our lands. You know this." She looked to her sister. "And as to my faith…" She paused. My faith. It was indeed hers, and it stirred up a feeling in her even stronger than the feelings that Neb had stirred up in the days when their dreams had touched and they had touched within them. She met the regent's eyes. "My faith is built upon two thousand years of the Homeward Dream, passed down from father to son until at last, it came to me."

"And mine," Xhum said, "hearkens back to the days before, when the Moon Wizard Raj Y'Zir fell to live among us and teach us the love of a father for his child. But regardless, our faiths are not mutually exclusive, young Winteria. Indeed they are intertwined. You are young in your knowledge of Y'Zir, but there are many passages about the Machtvolk and their role. Perhaps this one will interest you." He looked from her to Ria, and Winters followed the glance and saw the worry upon her face. " 'In the Winter of Days, a daughter shall be born

and named for the season of her arrival, and she shall call forth the true Machtvolk by blood in the shadow of the Deicide's pyre to take back that which was promised and heal that which was broken.' " It correlates with a passage from your own father's dreams that I suspect you have not read."

The words were unfamiliar to her. "I have read the Book of Dreaming Kings since my earliest recollection," she said. "I've not read any passage similar to that."

The regent looked to Ria again, and the woman smiled only slightly. "No, I suspect you haven't. But I digress. My point is that our faiths are built one upon the other. And more than that, they are intertwined one with the other."

She wanted to argue with him. She wanted to list the ways that they were different, but she saw clearly now that though he spoke of reason, there was no reasonable way to convey those differences. Her Marshers had skirmished with the Androfrancines and their neighbors, bellowing out War Sermons of a promised home as they did. They'd murdered for their faith even as surely as the Y'Zirites had. They'd raised their children in the certitude of those beliefs, baptizing them in mud and ash when they were old enough to walk. She swallowed, and her eyes darted again to Jin Li Tam. The Gypsy Queen's face was a mask, but her eyes bore both worry and curiosity.

Finally, she looked back to the regent and her sister. "Our faiths may be related, but they are not the same. And though parents may raise their children in the traditions they themselves were raised in, that does not make their belief necessarily compulsory."

The regent smiled. "Our way is not compulsory, though I think you believe for some reason it is."

Winters's eyes narrowed. "I know about the camps for those who dissent. I know about the children you are training on the blood magicks and the marks your priests cut over their hearts. I've visited the schools myself and heard your version of history."

The regent stepped toward her. "You believe the Y'Zirite faith is being imposed here. Very well. What assurance would you have from me that this is not the case?"

Winters looked out over the crowd. The gathered masses remained silent, and their faces were a kaleidoscope of emotion. Some were ecstatic, some frightened, a few even angry. What would serve my people best? "I intend to leave these lands," she said. "Your beliefs are an abomination to me. If you would assure me that your faith is not compulsory, then permit those of my people who wish it to follow me as I follow the Homeward Dream. Grant them the choice."

The regent and Ria exchanged glances. There was anger on the woman's face, though she tried to hide it. But Eliz Xhum simply

nodded slowly as his smile widened. "That is something I could agree to," he said. "But I would ask something of you in return, Winteria the Younger."

Winters saw movement out of the corner of her eye, and when she realized it was Jin Li Tam's hands, she forced herself to glance slowly and interpret the coded message from her peripheral vision. Be cautious here, Jin signed. Their bargains are never what they seem.

She knew this. She remembered the look of despondency and hope on Jin's face when Jin watched Petronus killed and then raised, then begged for her son's cure from the woman whose magicks had been so compelling. Like this night, it had also been before a crowd. "What would you ask of me?"

"On the Eve of the Falling Moon," he said, "it is customary to select one to go beneath the knife that their blood might be given to the earth for our sins upon her." He reached behind him to a waiting guard and took a large burlap sack filled nearly to the brim with bits of parchment from the man's hands. "Honor us by drawing the name of our blood-giver, and you and any who wish to leave with you may do so. But you will leave in the morning and you will not look back." Ria's face was red, but the regent continued. "I promise it," he said, and his voice rolled out and away.

Winters looked at the sack and then looked out over her people. "It is by lottery?"

He nodded. "That is the custom. It is a great honor to be selected."

"To be cut upon in the name of Y'Zir?"

"Yes."

Winters looked to the cutting table and saw the knives lying upon a velvet cloth nearby. She'd seen the table in the blood shrine with its dark stains and knew that Ria had killed upon it. And she'd heard the stories from the Tam survivors of what that family had been subjected to upon that island. She'd dreamed of Neb stretched out and staked, writhing and screaming beneath salted blades.

Reaching out, she took the sack from Xhum's hands and held it. She drew in a deep breath, and when she spoke, she looked out over her people. "When I became queen, the charge of those who went before me was that I love my people as a shepherd and study the dreams for them that they might find a better home." She looked at Ria and her voice rose. "When I climbed the Spire and declared myself, this was the promise I bore in my heart." She lifted the bag of names, and as she did, she heard Ria gasp and then caught the momentary flash of rage on the regent's face. "I will not harm my people," Winteria bat Mardic cried out. "I will not let them suffer beneath your knife."

Then, she hurtled the sack of parchments down from the platform

and watched the scraps of paper scatter on a cold wind that suddenly moaned around them.

The regent's voice betrayed impatience. "You are-"

But Winters interrupted him, her own voice sharp. "You will still have your blood, Eliz Xhum, and I will hold you to your promise."

She looked to Jin Li Tam, and when their eyes met, she knew the woman understood. The Gypsy Queen broke eye contact first, but not before Winters read the emotion clearly framed there.

She is afraid for me.

But in that moment, Winteria bat Mardic, Queen of the Marsh, was not afraid. She felt nothing but resolve. Fixing her eyes upon the moon where it hung high and inviting in the night sky, she walked to the cutting table and slowly started to undress. Charles The field lay shimmering white beneath the moon, and Charles squinted out over it to the hillside. Once the sun had dropped, the temperature had as well, and the freezing sweat beneath his clothing from hiking the snowdrifts added to the chill.

He'd come across the tracks hours ago and had known them instantly. The stride was far too long for any human, and the footprint was not dissimilar from those of his re-creations. The metal man-or Watcher, if that was its designation-had run this way, no doubt bound for the night's ceremony.

He'd retraced the prints with ease until the light went, mindful that his own tracks would give his path away as surely as the Watcher's had done. He'd pressed on into twilight, and when the dark settled in altogether and the moon rose, he found himself at the edge of the clearing.

He took a tentative step forward and then jumped when a voice of many waters roared out through the forest, resounding from the hills.

"May the grace of the Crimson Empress be with you." It was a woman's voice.

For a moment he thought he heard the distant roar of cheering, and then after more words, the woman launched into a discourse. Charles was familiar with voice magicks-they were distilled from blood and forbidden by the Articles of Kin-Clave, but the Marshers had never cared for, nor endorsed, those articles. They did not raise his curiosity nearly so much as the sermon she preached.

Like all acolytes, he'd studied the various resurgences that had sprung up. Most of the Franci behaviorists believed it was a holdover from the Age of Laughing Madness, much like the Marsher dreams his metal children now followed. But in the early words of the sermon that thundered out beneath the risen moon, Charles heard underlying structure supported by anecdotes and quotations from gospels and

prophecies he'd never heard of.

This is something new.

Still, as much as he wanted to comprehend this change, he was not here to listen about the grace and love of Y'Zir and its Crimson Empress or its Child of Great Promise. He forced himself back to the line of footprints leading back toward the hill. He could not make out exactly where they ended, and so he put first one booted foot in front of the other and trudged out after them.

As he made his way across the snowfield, he stopped at the sound of a faint movement on the far side and heard a low growl. He'd grown up in the humid jungles of the Outer Emerald Coast and had spent his childhood paying more attention to the tools his father hunted and fished with rather than the actual work, leaving him less experienced in woodcraft. But this was not the high-pitched growl of a cat. More likely, it was a bear or a wolf.

Charles stopped and held his breath. When the growl drifted over the snow the next time, it was closer and circling him. Squinting into dim moonlight, he saw a form-no, forms, large and four-footed, approaching him.

Wolves. Only larger than wolves should be.

There were two of them, and even as he crouched and drew the hunting knife Garyt had given him to complete his Marsher disguise, he knew he'd be no match for what he suspected now hunted him.

He'd heard of kin-wolves, those rare leftovers from the days of the Wizard Kings, reduced to small but savage packs that roved the Churning Wastes and harried the Order's expeditions in that desolation. But beyond the studies, sketches and bones from the Office of Natural Science, he'd not seen one.

He waited and held his breath.

When something fast shot past his head, he flinched and fell backward even as the first shadowy form yelped. It took him a moment to make the connection. He struggled up out of the snow as a second and third bullet zipped across the open meadow to find their marks in their targets; then the kin-wolves were snarling and leaping past him.

A half dozen windstorms kicked up snow as another four bullets shot from magicked slings impacted. The volley brought one of the wolves down, and it thrashed and yelped as invisible blades from scouts on the run found it and carved it in a snow-swept dance.

A hand gripped Charles's upper arm to drag him back and away. When he offered momentary resistance a harsh voice whispered into his ear. "I told you to stay put, Gray Robe," Aedric said.

Charles felt the strength in the man's hand as Aedric pulled him backward through the snow, and the arch-engineer said nothing,

simply watched and listened as Rudolfo's Gypsy Scouts did their work. The second wolf put up more fight but eventually succumbed to bullet and blade. When it was finished, Aedric's men clicked their tongues quietly against the roofs of their mouths to announce their status.

With help from Aedric's strong hands, Charles climbed to his feet, shaken. "Thank you," he said, the fear of it all suddenly settling upon him like clouds on the Delta.

Aedric's voice still held anger in it. "Do not thank me yet, old man. Just hope that what you and Isaak need so badly can be found in yon metal man's cave and that it is worth the lives of my men."

One of the scouts whistled for Aedric, and Charles walked with him, watching the prints from invisible feet materialize within the broken snow in an attempt to confuse his footprints. A match flared, and the light and smoke from it dimly illuminated part of a hand as a watch lantern was lit. Its lens of light was turned to the bloody ground, and Charles saw now the massive, dark-furred kin-wolves stretched out in death. The dark iron collars surprised him.

Aedric's voice was low and muffled by the magicks. "It seems our metal friend has set out watchdogs in the days since we've last visited him." He pointed to the bodies. "Take them up and bring them."

Then, by the light of the small lantern, Charles followed them to the waiting cave entrance, where they stood and listened. But the booming voice and its impassioned rambling about blood and life and empresses drowned out any sound that might've drifted back to them from deep beneath the ground.

"We go in carefully," Aedric whispered. His finger found Charles's chest and poked it. "You stay behind us until we know it's safe." He was quiet for a moment, then spoke again. "Feris, Grun, stay back here and guard our backs." Then, in afterthought, he added, "Skin these pups for me while you wait."

Charles blinked. "Why would you-"

But Aedric cut him off. "It is not your concern. You just worry yourself about finding your missing pages. You've only my grace because of the two queens who've granted theirs. This is madness, in my mind."

Charles waited until he felt the wind of them moving into the cave and then followed after. As they moved, slowly, he watched as the light fell upon the stone walls and tried to filter out the thick smell of dung and blood that choked him. When they reached the first room and its line of cages, they stopped again. Within the cages, birds of a dozen nations waited amid their stacks of papers. "In for a drachma," Aedric muttered before ordering his men to wring the birds' necks and gather up what intelligence could be found. "After tonight," he said, "our welcome will indeed be worn."

They only spent a few minutes in the cutting room, and Charles was glad of it, for that was the worst-reeking space. They left it untouched and moved into its simple working space with its tables of potions and powders, inks and papers.

Aedric's voice drifted across the room. "Tell us what we look for, Francine."

Charles went to the table of papers. "Parchment pages," he said, "handwritten and of varying ages." Of course, despite the potions the Marshers used to preserve the ancient tomes that held their dreams, some of these pages might not have survived their removal from the books. He only hoped that whatever they might find here would be sufficient for his children's antiphon to be successful.

Still, as they sifted through the room they found nothing that matched what they sought. They'd stuffed a sack full of the gospels they'd found, freshly transcribed and bound in leather, adding to that sack anything else Aedric deemed worthless to them. And just as they were finishing, one of the scouts whistled them over.

"There is a door here," a muffled voice said as a buckskin was lifted aside to reveal a small, dark door in the wall. The small dial betrayed a Rufello lock, and Charles pushed past the invisible scouts to kneel and look at it by the light of their lantern. He stretched out his fingers and felt the lock. It was one of Rufello's simpler models-one of the more common they'd found.

"I know this lock," he muttered. Many of the inventor's smaller locks had been designed with a master cipher known only to the Czarist engineer and coded into his Book of Specifications.

"Can you open it?" Aedric asked.

"If its universal release has not been reset, I can." He licked his lips. "Otherwise, we'd need Isaak or one of the others."

"We do not have that luxury."

Charles pressed his ear to the lock and shifted the dial, pressing at the buttons and levers set into the faceplate around it with careful fingers. When the first code brought about a quiet click inside the lock, the old man smiled.

"I have it," he said, and after he finished, he let Aedric pull him back so that they could cast their light within the chamber that awaited them when the door swung open on oiled hinges.

The familiarity of the room hit him first. It was nearly the mirror image of the same chamber in the northern reaches of Rudolfo's Ninefold Forest, a sealed hatch set in the granite floor and the walls lined with tables. Upon the tables, he saw the bent and twisted bits of wreckage so out of place here, though in hindsight it made sense.

"Gods," he whispered, walking into the room. He traced his fingers over some of the objects and drew up his memory of them and

of the last day he'd seen them. There were tools and broken artifacts, scorched by the fires of the Seven Cacophonic Deaths. The broken wings of moon sparrows and the warped barrels of hand-cannons kept hidden in deep vaults, unknown even to the Pope. There were bits of metal scroll and broken pens for scripting them.

They're excavating Windwir, he realized as he felt his stomach sink. They're excavating my workshop.

But as staggering as that was, it was nothing compared to what he saw next, dead and looking nothing like the petrified remains they'd found in the deepest ruins of the Churning Wastes. This specimen lay stretched out, its eight large legs tacked to the wood of the table and its seedwomb cut open and empty. He stretched back his memory to his studies of this particular madness but could not remember just how many thousands of eggs each one carried. But he remembered how quickly they reproduced, and the knot in his stomach clenched even as he forgot to breathe.

"We need to leave," he said, and the panic in his voice made it shake. "Now."

"Gather what-"

"No," Charles said. "We leave the past in the past," he said. "We need to go now. We need birds to send to Rudolfo-as many as we have."

"What is it?" Aedric's voice now took on a quietness that Charles thought must be fear, and he was glad of it. We should be afraid.

But Charles didn't answer. Instead, he turned and left. He moved quickly through the caves, and when he broke into the fresh, cold air of the winter night he found the forest was full of screaming. He did not recognize the voice, but her agony filled sky.

Aedric caught up to him and spun him around. "You do not have the luxury of secrets or silence," he said in a voice now obviously afraid and angry about that fear.

Charles took in a deep breath and tried to force the screaming from his ears, tried to keep from screaming himself. "They're digging up Windwir," he sobbed. "And they've brought back the plague spiders."

Aedric said nothing, but Charles heard the gasps of his men. Every boy and girl learned about the Seven Cacophonic Deaths in ghost tales passed down around fires and in moral lessons from their parents. "Behave," they'd say, "or Xhum Y'Zir's death golems will find you." "Be kind to your sister, or plague spiders might visit their fevers upon her in the night." They were cruel admonitions that none would offer if they'd known what darkness truly lay within that spell that had decimated the Old World.

They took all of the birds they had between them, brown and

white both, and as three of the scouts worked their ink needles and pulled black threads from their scarves of rank, the others laid a fire to the sack of gospels and what parchments Aedric deemed unhelpful for intelligence.

Then, the sack of documents that remained vanished into a magicked cloak. Three of the ghosts pulled away, and when they returned, Charles felt Aedric's hand upon his shoulder.

"We've not found what you sought, but perhaps what you did not seek will be worth this incursion. This Watcher will not be pleased by this."

No, Charles thought, but truly the time for secrets and silence has passed. He said nothing.

"I am sending two men back to our borders. If the birds do not reach Rudolfo, at least these men might. And I'm going to ask Lady Tam strongly to bring our stay here to a close immediately."

Charles nodded. "That is wise, Captain." And I should leave as well. But despite what they found here, what they had not found here still held him to his work. The missing pages were not here. They were either with the Watcher or-and more and more, Charles feared this-they'd been destroyed as soon as they were pulled from the books. Regardless, he knew now that he had to consult with Isaak and the other metal man before he proceeded. "I'll need to return to the Book of Dreaming Kings."

"I will see you there," Aedric said.

The screams were growing weaker now, and Charles hoped whoever twisted beneath the Y'Zirite knife would die soon and be far from the salted pain that racked them.

The fire burned there at the mouth of the cave, its smoke lifting in a narrow trail that blurred the moon. They stood around it in silence, and then, at the last, Aedric himself folded the bloody kin-wolf hides and left them in the mouth of the cave.

Charles watched flames lick parchment and knew that this gesture would be just a raindrop upon an ocean of need. He also knew there would be ripples from it, and he wished he could gauge just how far those ripples would spread.

Closing his eyes and praying to gods he did not believe in, Charles turned and walked into a forest of screams, the ghosts around him whispering across the snow and the ghosts within him whispering along his spine. Jin Li Tam The screams at last were weakening, and for the thousandth time, Jin Li Tam forced her face calm and forced her hands to her sides. She'd identified at least six knives and two pouches of scout magicks she could have taken and had calculated at least four paths to the cutting table and three possible routes off the platform and into a crowd that might hide her and the girl.

Of course, she'd done this after handing Jakob over to a distraught and weeping Lynnae, bidding her bear him back to their rooms in the hope that the screaming would be muffled there. Ria had shot her a questioning glance that had gone sour when she saw the rage in Jin's eyes.

The Machtvolk queen made her way over to her to take the seat that Winters had vacated to take her place upon the table. "I know our ways seem strange to you, but this is truly a great honor my little sister has taken upon herself. And for you and your son to be present for it is the fulfillment of two millennia of longing."

Jin Li Tam had bitten her tongue and tasted her lie. "The voice magicks frighten him," she said simply, and then forced her eyes back to the girl upon the table until Ria finally returned to her own place to take up her silver axe with a smile.

Courage, she had willed her eyes to convey to the girl, but Winters had stopped seeing anything many cuts ago.

Now, it seemed the regent's work was drawing to an end. Her screams quieted as the knives moved slower and more slightly over her skin and as the voice magicks burned themselves out. Jin found herself wondering just how far away her screams had been carried.

With careful fingers red with Winters's blood, Eliz Xhum reached up now to untie her hands one at a time. Then, he untied her feet and gently rolled the girl onto her back. Jin saw the whites of her eyes, and her moan was the sound of thunder. Once again, she found herself nearly losing her composure and still was not certain she did the right thing.

She makes her own path, and I must respect it. She was fairly certain that the cutting was not a part of Winters's plan, but the girl had shown some premeditation in smuggling the voice magicks into the gathering and making her loud proclamation. And she'd kept it to herself.

Certainly, Jin realized, they both had their secrets. Aedric had sought her out regarding the missing pages from the book, and she was confident that Winters had known of this as well. She wondered if the girl had picked up the subtle message she'd intended by sending Aedric to her to confirm that fact. And she wondered how Aedric and Charles fared and if, as she suspected, the Watcher had left his cave to watch this first open mass in the Named Lands.

She did not subscribe to the Marsh dreams herself, though she took it more seriously now that she'd had time to get to know the girl.

And now I know just how seriously the girl takes it.

The knives were down now, and the regent was reaching for buckets of steaming water and clean white rags, laid near the table where Winters stretched out naked and bleeding.

Something broke in her, and the rage could no longer be contained. She stood and pushed her way to the front as he squeezed out the excess water, a smile of pure love upon his face.

"No," she said in a loud voice. "You'll not touch her again." She doubted it carried very far, but it carried far enough. He straightened and turned to her as she approached, and whatever he saw upon her face took his smile away.

"Great Mother," he began, "it is customary-"

But she interrupted him. "I will tend her. You've done enough." Then, she poured every bit of the rage she felt into her eyes and watched him blink at what he saw. She walked to him and snatched the cloth away before he could object.

The words of her sister-if indeed it was her sister-suddenly reasserted themselves, and she could not fathom why under any circumstances she would go with this man. She forced the thought aside and pushed past the regent to stand near the girl. He looked from her to Winters, then nodded slightly and returned to his seat.

She leaned over the girl, taking in the smell of her blood. "This is going to hurt," she said as she lifted the cloth.

The girl fidgeted and croaked; it took Jin a moment to recognize the word. "No." Then, the girl mumbled words she could not make out.

She does not wish to be washed clean of this.

She bent her head closer. Behind her, Ria was on her feet and inviting others to stand as another Y'Zirite hymn rose up into the night. It was a song about kin-healing, and despite the noise of it, she could just make out Winters's whispering.

"And she shall call forth the true Machtvolk by blood," the girl muttered, and Jin Li Tam understood. Let them see her, naked and bleeding for them. This blood purchased exodus for those who chose it.

She rose up and turned to the regent. Their eyes met. "You will honor your promise?" she asked across the platform, her voice drowning in song.

"Yes," he said.

Then she turned back to Winters. "Can you walk?"

The girl struggled, and Jin took hold of her arm to help her up. Her hand slipped over the blood and Winters gasped, but she rolled and sat up on the table. Jin cast a glance to her neatly folded dress and furs, but knew that anything she put over the girl would simply add more pain to what she'd already faced. Instead, she tried to find a part of her body that had not been cut and helped pull her, sobbing, to her feet.

"Lean on me," she said, "as best you can."

Together, with slow and measured steps, they crossed the

platform, and Winters cried out softly with each step, though Jin knew she tried not to. They would leave this place, and when they were alone, Jin would wash the true queen of the Machtvolk clean of the blood and see her to Lynnae's care for the treatment of her wounds.

When they climbed down from the platform, she guided the girl onto the wooden boardwalk and noted the wash of emotion upon the faces of those they passed. Some wept in ecstasy and others in sorrow. Some averted their eyes in shame and others gazed upon her in pride.

They shuffled their way out of the crowd, and when they were safely into the forest beyond the gathering, Winters slumped against her and nearly fell. The girl was of small frame, but the dead weight of her staggered Jin, and she held her for a moment.

Then, she felt a hand upon her shoulder and looked up into the face of a weeping young Machtvolk soldier. She'd seen this one before, guarding the door that led into the abandoned throne room and the caves that wound their way down to the Book of Dreaming Kings.

The young man scooped the girl into his arms, and Jin heard the sorrow catch in his throat as Winters cried out at his touch. "I will bear you, my queen," the young man said in a voice that stumbled with emotion.

Jin inclined her head. "Thank you."

He returned the gesture and then set out down the wooden boardwalk in the direction of Ria's lodge.

Jin paused before turning to follow him. The night was filled now with song instead of screaming, and she looked back in the direction of the singing.

This must be ended.

She did not know now how that could happen exactly. It was a vastly larger proposition than she had conceived when she'd first seen the beginnings of this resurgence last year. And she'd had no suspicion that anything could be darker and more frightening than the pillar of smoke and fire on the day that Windwir fell. But that pyre, it seemed, had only been the beginning of a darkness she could not comprehend and could not bear to be a part of.

The last thing she noticed, gleaming wetly in the scattered moonlight that penetrated the evergreen canopy, was the footprints in blood leading backward along the way that they had taken.

"We walk a path of blood," Jin Li Tam whispered, and as she said it, a shudder ran its course along her body, like the kiss of a silver blade over a cold and salted wound.

Chapter 27

Neb An unsettling calm flooded him, and Neb looked down to where he stood upon the silver pond before looking back up to the waiting mechoservitors.

He could feel their song now vibrating up through his feet, and he could hear the whispering of their processing scrolls in the aether.

And from where he stood, he could sense a myriad other vibrations in the strange waters.

You stand upon the veins of the world. They are yours to command now, something whispered within him. And the aether is yours to walk, but you will need assistance there.

He cocked his head. "Father?"

I am with you, Son, but only for a short while. I cannot follow where you must go. A strong sense of urgency flooded him, and he felt the pull of his inner eye eastward across the aether. But whatever lay there was out of reach.

Neb walked to the waiting mechoservitors, and as he did, they both knelt. He took his robe from them and clothed himself. One reached within a pouch to withdraw a small object and hold it out to him in a closed metal fist. "I've held this for you, Lord Whym," the mechoservitor said, its voice reedy.

When the small black bird fell into the palm of his hand, the world shifted and Neb fought the vertigo that seized him. His mind flashed back to his last encounter with it, lying naked and staked in the Churning Wastes while the Blood Guard took their knives to him and pressed a similar bit of carved stone into his skin. Now he saw the meaning of it.

The stone extends my sight within the aether. They'd used it to find the location of the antiphon.

Yes. Once more, the whispering of his father's ghost.

Neb felt the slightest tingle beneath his scalp, soft fingers on his brain, pulling at him, and he gave himself to it. This is how you look, the whisper continued. And Neb understood, bending the lens of the dreamstone east.

He found Petronus first. The old man stood at the foot of a tall door, surrounded by a ragged group of Gypsy Scouts, Gray Guard and sailors looking out of place. The song poured out from the old man.

No, he realized, it poured out from the pouch the old man held.

Neb smiled. "You hold the dream, Father Petronus."

Petronus jerked alert and looked around, his eyes wide.

"Do not be afraid, Father. It's only me."

His voice was incredulous. "Neb?"

There was a low rumbling, and Neb saw that the gate was slowly swinging open. And though he could not see behind the gate with his eyes, the aether showed him. A single metal man dressed in Androfrancine robes worked the large wheel that opened the way to them. Beyond him, others took down the scaffolding and camouflage to reveal a large metal vessel that was tethered to the ground. Overhead, the moon filled the small circle of sky visible from the bottom of the hollow mountain.

Amber eyes turned upon him. "The antiphon is ready for you, Nebios Homeseeker, son of Whym."

But before he could speak, those ghostly fingers were in his mind again, pulling him away, and he looked south to see a storm of wind that raced across the shattered plains, raising clouds of dust. Time, his father's ghost told him, is of the essence.

"But how will I-?"

The ghost anticipated him. You will swim the veins. I will show you. Already, the fingers were back, and Neb felt as if parts of his mind long left dark were suddenly lit, though poorly. He saw the veins and the pools they linked to, a world shot through with silver, and he knew that it was made for him. He held dominion over every aspect of it, and it served him with gladness. The vast network of pools were his for traveling if he bent them to his will.

He was before Petronus again as the man and the others moved quickly into the large cavern behind the door. "I will be to you soon," he said, "but they will be to you sooner. You must hold the gate against them."

Petronus opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, a scream rose from the west so loud that it blotted out the song. The old man's eyes went wide and Neb faltered. He lost hold of the aether and found himself suddenly pulled back to the cave and the mechoservitors who still knelt before him.

The scream was still with him even in that place, and the sound of it raised the hair on his arms. There was familiarity in the shrill cry, and the power of it drowned out all other sound within the aether.

He released the stone and fell to his knees to bury his face in his hands and somehow rub the pain from his skull.

You are new to the dreamstone, the whisper told him, but with time you will learn how to control it.

He couldn't find his voice. Instead, Neb poured focus into his own thought. Who is it?

It is irrelevant; time is of the essence. The antiphon awaits.

But the familiarity of the voice chewed him, and with shaking fingers, he reached out again to take up the carved kin-raven.

Her scream flooded him when his fingers closed around the stone.

Closing his eyes and gritting his teeth, he forced himself to steer into the scream and follow it west across the aether. What he saw broke him, and his own cry joined hers.

He knew her instantly, stretched out upon the table, and the shock of seeing her there blinded him momentarily to the massive crowd that watched. He saw the lines of words upon her bleeding skin, saw the strong, sure hand that wielded the silver knife, and it summoned a memory of pain and despair. He felt the bite of the hard ground in wounds now healed, felt the burn of salted blades upon the softest of his skin, and heard the questions incessantly asked as the kin-raven was pressed to each wound.

Neb blinked. "Winters," he whispered.

Their eyes met for the briefest moment before her back arched and she screamed again. The man who stood over her wore a red robe and set to his work with a quiet smile. Now Neb took in their surroundings and saw the gathering. He saw the platform, saw Jin Li Tam as she whispered with a woman he did not know before handing a baby-Lord Jakob, he realized-over to her. Another woman, one who could be an older twin to Winters, stood by watching the man at his knife work.

Abomination.

It was a metal voice that filled his mind, overpowering even the screams.

Neb looked around and singled out a lone robed figure on a hillside. "Who are you?"

I am one who watches. Your woman is beneath the knife. Come and save her, I bid you. There was a tone of amusement in the voice. Surely your baptism has revealed your heritage. Surely you have now attained dominion over the ancient ways.

Come and save her, Abomination.

Neb saw the distant flash of jeweled eyes from beneath the cowl.

Do not listen, the ghost of his father whispered.

But Neb did not know how to do that. The sound of the screams tore at him from the inside, wrenching a sob from him even as he pulled back from the aether.

"Time is of the essence," he told the metal men. "I must leave you now. Join Rudolfo in his work. He will hide you among the others."

He turned to the bargaining pool and stepped out onto it, willing its silver water to bear his weight. He clutched the kin-raven in his fist and felt the veins of the world shifting and whispering beneath his feet.

He looked first east to the pool buried deep beneath the antiphon, then looked west to find the pool closest to Winters.

All will be lost, the voice inside told him, if you do not reach the

antiphon.

He heard the truth in it, though he also knew from the canticle that played among his abacus, his metal servants, that only part of the antiphon was truly complete. Silence to the south told him that his abacus had failed there, that Frederico's kin had yet to attain the staff. And in the midst of the madness to his west, a dream could not be found.

He felt the weight of it, but a greater weight settled upon him, and it surprised him after so long away from the girl.

"No," Neb said, "all will be lost if I lose her."

Then, he bent the fingers of his mind west and pulled at the vein that would carry him there. Light swallowed him as he descended suddenly into the pool and rushed at him, roaring, as he shot west, now blue-green lightning in a twisting stream of silver.

When he stood at last upon the pool he'd called for, he stretched out a hand over it.

"Clothe me," Nebios Whym cried out, though he was uncertain why he did so.

The blood of the earth heard him and gave itself to him, rising from the pool to enfold him in its embrace. It crept over him, into his ears and nostrils and mouth, and he pulled it in to himself with a reflex he did not know he had.

He felt strength flooding his body even as the makers and workers within that fluid shored him up and fit his hands for war. He felt his mind clearing, felt the gentle rhythm of his breathing as it steadied.

He stared down at his hands and flexed them. The sheath that encompassed them flexed as well, fluctuating between a bright white that blinded and a silver so pure that its intensity reflected his surroundings and bent light around him.

He took the dreamstone from his pocket now, letting his fingers brush its dark surface. Winters's screams still flooded the aether, and he winced as he turned in the direction they came from.

Two leagues hence he knew a ladder and hatch awaited him. Beyond that, the woman he loved and must soon leave lay writhing beneath knives his own body remembered too well.

"I am coming," he whispered to her where she lay stretched upon the table.

He ignored the metal laughter that tickled in the back of his brain and, instead, gave himself over to the surge of strength within his legs, the sudden sureness of his feet in dark places, the sweeping song that filled him up to overflowing and threatened to burst his heart. Vlad Li Tam A wall of water struck him and then lifted Vlad Li Tam up, bringing him down hard, and he moved into a breaststroke in the direction of Behemoth. The sea was hot enough to burn him, and his

nose stung from the briny steam that lifted from it.

What in hells is it?

It thrashed the waters, and as a wave lifted him up, Vlad saw that the beast-something like a snake-had turned in their direction, its maw grinding open. Ahead, Mal Li Tam swam for the open mouth, and Vlad tried to recall what Obadiah had told him about Behemoth.

He will take you into the basements of the ladder.

His first grandson spilled over into the gaping mouth and vanished.

Vlad felt the strain in his chest as he swam for it. He did not know what lay in the basements of the ladder, but he knew that the dream required it and that the d'jin had brought him to the dream and to this place. He swam and felt his muscles straining.

When the next wave raised him up, he was nearly upon it. And then when it dropped him, he found himself tumbling into a metal mouth lined with algae and sea moss. He caught at it with his hands to slow his fall, but the water pushed him deeper in, and the slick sides of the inner mouth afforded him no grip. Vlad felt himself tumbling and then felt his fall slowing as the beast leveled out.

At one point, he thought he brushed up against a soft, yielding form that flinched at his touch, but then he fell away from it and found himself suddenly caught by a pocket of water. His fingers were still curled tightly around the handle of his knife, and when his feet pushed against the soft, slippery floor, he kicked against it gently and let that kick carry him to a surface that was not far out of reach. Even under the hot water, he could hear the loud grind and clank of Behemoth's machinery, and when he found the warm, brine-thick air, he drew it in quietly.

There was a faint glow to the algae that cast eerie light upon the large chamber he found himself in. Several spans away, he saw his grandson crawling onto a metal platform as a new sound joined the dull roar that enveloped them-a high-pitched whine.

The water level started dropping.

Vlad took stock quickly. He had his knife and he had the advantage of the scout magicks for at least another handful of hours. But his grandson had years, and more than that, he seemed to have some sense of what he was here to do. Even now, the young man was walking along the far metal wall, and Vlad watched him stop to work the wheel of a large hatch. When it swung open, red light poured out from it, and Vlad watched as Mal Li Tam disappeared into it, pulling the hatch closed behind him.

He made his way to the platform and climbed onto it, walking to the hatch. He could feel his years now in his muscles and joints as they protested with each step, and he forced his breath in and out

slowly as he lay his ear to the warm metal door. Beyond it, he heard nothing but the sounds of massive gears and the shifting plates of the segmented metal snake.

As a Tam, he'd had special dispensation from the Pope and had seen many of the mechanical wonders of the Old World and the older world that lay beneath the ruins of it, but he'd seen nothing like this. He'd thought his iron armada or their mechanical men to be a great wonder, but this Behemoth was like nothing he'd imagined, and he suspected that this was merely the anteroom.

He counted to a hundred before he put his hands upon the wheel and turned it slowly. Then, cautiously, he pulled open the hatch enough to look inside. A long corridor stretched out, and it moved and twisted even as the beast did. Its walls were lined with doors, illuminated dimly by red jewels set into the ceiling. At the far end, a door stood open where Mal must've gone, and Vlad quickly slipped into the hallway and pulled the hatch closed behind him.

He felt the pressure shifting around him as the beast descended in a wide, slow spiral, and somewhere behind him, the whining suddenly stopped. Yet even as Behemoth moved, he found his feet steady beneath him and he made his way slowly up the hallway.

He was halfway down the shifting corridor when his grandson appeared at the end. He walked easy, standing tall with his knife dangling loosely in his hand as he went. He left the door open and tugged at another. This one did not open and the young man moved to the next, gradually working his way back toward Vlad.

He could not imagine what might be behind the doors but was certain it wasn't worth being discovered, despite his curiosity. He could visualize bunks and passenger cabins, supply rooms and galleys in this most unusual machine, and he wondered if somewhere within this metal serpent there also lay a pilothouse or if, like the metal men, there was simply a cavity filled with scrolls that spun out a scripted response that had been etched into it millennia before by whomever had crafted the mighty mechanical.

Vlad found a corner of the corridor with less light and huddled in it, mindful of the puddle his wet clothing created. At the far end of the corridor, Mal Li Tam opened another half dozen doors, disappearing into each for minutes that seemed like hours.

Just stay to your end of it, Vlad willed. Then, he turned himself to thought.

She had brought him to the ladder with some urgency, and he suspected now that the timing of his arrival was intended to coincide with the full moon. And certainly, it seemed that his family's blood played into it as well. But what of the strange ceremony aboard both the ship he had fled and, he assumed, the other ships that were

gathering there? Was this some new aspect of those dark blood magicks this resurgence had brought back? And what was his d'jin's role in it?

He collated the data and stored it with the rest he'd mined in the time since he'd first read the slender book that he'd taken from his grandson.

As they descended, the corridor shuddered, and Vlad heard the deep groaning of the metal even as he felt it beneath his feet and the red lights flickered and dimmed. He watched the jewels and found himself wondering what powered the large machine. Surely not the sunstones that drove his armada or the metal men. The waters around the Ladder killed those ancient power sources, if Obadiah's experience rang true, and whatever it was that tainted this part of the Ghosting Crests also held the d'jin at bay. Thousands of the rare sea lights, including the one he specifically followed, were waiting at the edge of a perimeter only visible because of their presence.

The machine lurched and shuddered now, and Vlad pressed his back tighter against the wall he crouched against. His grandson was moving toward him again, and once more Vlad calculated just how long the powders would hold. He'd remagicked before returning to the deck with his daughter Myr maybe two hours earlier, leaving him nearly twice that remaining. They would gutter and spark for thirty minutes before finally burning out, but if he kept to the shadows…

Another groan, and the vessel shivered again, its descent leveling out before it shifted and rose and then stopped.

Mal Li Tam poked his head out from an open door and came into the hallway with deliberate steps. He moved quickly down the hall, and Vlad found himself holding his breath, gripping his knife tightly, as the young man approached.

I could kill him now and be done with it. The naked back was to him now as Mal worked the hatch, and Vlad saw at least three paths that would leave the boy bleeding out his last. He was under no illusions that it was exactly how things would play out at some point between now and the first moment his magicks began to gutter-he could not afford to lose the one advantage he held. But for now, he restrained himself. Still, each time he imagined the scenario-the knife blade slipping between his grandson's ribs or sliding across his throat-a warm satisfaction flooded him, fueled by the memory of his children's screams.

Mal left the hatch open when he passed through, and Vlad counted again silently before he followed.

Behemoth's mouth gaped open now, and faint light filtered in the massive pool it created. At the edge of it, near a row of metal teeth the height of a man, Mal paced and looked for a place to climb. Vlad

moved slowly through pockets of shadow, eyes never leaving his prey, and when the young man scrambled up over the teeth and into the dim light beyond, Vlad moved faster, the sound of his feet in the water masked by the grinding and clanking of the mechanical, though even now those noises were subsiding.

He reached the edge of the mouth and leaped to catch the top of a massive tooth, and despite the scout powders, he felt the exertion in his muscles and in his chest. Pulling himself up with a muffled groan, he stretched himself out over the top of the teeth and held himself in place so he could look around.

Behemoth rested now in a dim lagoon lit poorly by more of the red jewels, casting the dark water in a rust-colored light. It had brought itself to a stop, open mouth pressed close against a stone pier.

This is the basement of the ladder.

The sound of footsteps echoing through the chamber turned his head, and he saw Mal climbing a staircase cut into the far wall. Sighing, Vlad pushed himself up and scrambled onto the pier, trying to control his breathing as he went.

He pulled himself up and turned back to Behemoth where it lay stretched out. The size of it daunted him, and even as he watched, he saw steam venting from it as its gears wound down, and he imagined it sleeping here, waiting for the appointed time for its appearance.

Called forth by blood.

Shivering suddenly, Vlad set off at a brisk walk toward the stairs and soon found himself climbing. He slowed when his ascent stitched his side and threatened his breathing, pausing here and there to listen for the bare slap of Mal's feet on the steps above him. When he reached the top, he saw another open hatch and found himself reeling from a kind of vertigo when he passed through it and found himself surrounded by water, above and below and around him. It was a corridor of crystal that stretched out across an expanse to end at another hatch.

Mal Li Tam worked the wheel of it and then slipped inside. Vlad followed carefully and quickly after.

He followed his grandson for what seemed hours, up stairs and down ladders, through crystal corridors and red-lit chambers with purposes now lost to time. Finally, as his scout powders showed their first sign of guttering and burning out, he passed through another hatch and came to a sudden stop.

This chamber was also crystalline-vast and round-and hanging in the center of it, suspended by silver wires thick as palm trees, was a massive and dark orb. A circular staircase led up from the bottom of the round chamber, stopping at a platform just beneath the stone, and already Mal was taking those steps two at a time.

This is what he seeks.

And Vlad knew that it must be the same for him, though he did not comprehend what it was exactly. Still, with the younger man's sudden burst of energy he felt his own sense of urgency grow.

He felt heat just beneath his skin as the scout magicks guttered again, and he tightened his grip upon the handle of the knife. He moved as quickly as he could without making sound or wind, his feet whispering across the floor and then upon the stairs.

Mal had reached the platform now, and from Vlad's new vantage point, he could better see the orb that hung above them. At first, he thought it was fractured, but as he drew closer he saw that the glass was shot through with silver veins. Already, his grandson had dropped his knife and was climbing up into the thick wires that supported it, moving along the dark surface of the orb.

Vlad reached the platform, scooped up the knife, and leaned back to watch the young man climb.

What is he doing?

Mal Li Tam stood upon the top of the orb now and laid both of his hands upon something that protruded from it. Vlad heard the youth grunting as he tugged on it, and when it began to give, it slid out of the stone with a sound that was nearly music. As he withdrew it, the veins of silver dissipated, and even below on the platform, Vlad felt a tickling in his ears as something, somewhere stirred to life with the faintest vibration.

It built, and he realized that as it did, the light in the room grew. When the long, slender staff was completely free of the stone, Mal Li Tam extended it upward with both hands with a loud cry. The light radiating from the stone's core reflected white and hot from the surface of the silver staff, but an even greater light, from beyond the crystal room, rose to cast its eerie reflection.

The room itself began to move, the stone rotating with it as the wires that supported it whispered and sang. Vlad placed his back to the railing and crouched, trying to keep his focus on the movements of his grandson as Mal made his way down, the silver rod clenched tightly in one hand.

When his feet are on the platform I will strike.

But the rising light pulled at his eyes, and as it did, he found tears welling up again at the beauty of what he saw. Blue-green light from all sides drove away the shadows as d'jin filled the sea beyond the crystal vault. Writhing and twisting, they danced through the waters, and the vibration in his ears became a familiar song even as the knife within his hands became an antiphon of its own-a response to that song that he would soon give.

One d'jin, larger than the others and moving with a fluid grace he

knew very well, separated itself from the others and descended into the silver veins, flooding the glass stone and transforming it into a blinding moon.

Mal's feet dangled over the platform now, and Vlad held his breath.

When those feet touched down, Vlad Li Tam smiled and let loose his fury, bathed in the light of a love he could not comprehend, knife-dancing to a song that required his response. Petronus They moved through the caves at a rapid walk, often reduced to single file as they followed their metal guide. Petronus walked at the front with Grymlis and Rafe Merrique, while the others spread out behind them.

The metal man had said little since admitting them, despite Petronus's attempts to engage it, and now he'd left the mechanical to its secrets, focusing instead on his unexpected encounter with Neb in a waking dream that left his nose bleeding and his skull pounding. The boy was nothing like the orphan he'd found in Sethbert's camp two years ago. There was a confidence and strength about him even beyond what he'd attained in the grave-digging of Windwir, and along with that confidence and strength, there was a hard edge and a sadness. It didn't take much Franci behaviorist training to see it or to speculate as to what kinds of events might have brought it forth in him.

Just his time under their knives would be enough to change him forever. But Petronus suspected more than that had altered the boy. Beyond the cutting, there was the reason behind it-his role as the Marsher Homeseeker, something that until a few weeks ago Petronus had disbelieved.

Until I was pulled into the mythology myself.

And now, he could not help but believe that he stood upon the precipice of something of vital importance, though he had no real information to prove it was so. And equally, he believed that it was likely he and this ragged group of men he led would not survive to see the antiphon do what it was made for.

Still, he knew they would give their lives for it.

Ahead of them, a dim light grew, and when they spilled out into the open, Petronus saw that it was the moon, high and full above the mountain. It washed the valley with blue-green light, reflecting off a large metal mass he saw there.

He'd seen it hidden with evergreen branches upon a massive series of scaffolds those times he'd seen this space in his dreams, but now he saw it standing free of the scaffolds and open to the night.

No, he realized, not standing. Floating. Easily the size of one of Tam's vessels, made of a burnished gold, the ship hung tethered to the rocky ground. A large door in it stood open, and metal men hauled

sacks and crates of supplies along a gangway.

Petronus blinked, taking in the image and recognizing it.

"Gods," he whispered. "Do you see it?"

From the corner of his eye, he saw Grymlis nod. "Aye, Father."

He'd seen the drawings-those fragments they'd been able to find in Rufello's Book of Specifications. It was that old Czarist engineer's greatest accomplishment, blending ancient sciences and magicks with those considered modern when he served the czars. As a boy, Felip Carnelyin's One Hundredth Tale had been one of his favorites, though much of the story had been lost over the millennia that had passed. Still, Petronus had no doubt what he saw. It clicked into place the last of this lock's cipher, and he understood.

It is the ship that sailed the moon.

Somehow, the metal men of Sanctorum Lux had reconstructed it here, in secret, and even now Petronus saw they prepared it for flight.

He forced his feet to their work again and moved out of the cave and into the open air, allowing the men behind him to fan out. He wondered how many of them would recognize what hung suspended in the air before them, chained to the ground as it hummed and sputtered.

He felt a metal hand upon his shoulder, and he tore his eyes away from the ship to take in the metal man before him.

"Father Petronus," the mechoservitor said, "you should not have come."

His eyes slid past the amber eyes to the vessel beyond. It is larger than I imagined. Swallowing, he forced his eyes back to the metal man. "Hebda told me I was needed here."

"He and his kind have been interfering a great deal of late."

His kind. "Still," Petronus said, "we are here. We will see your antiphon safely into the air." He could not take his eyes off of it, and quick glances to his left and right told him that it was the same for his men as more and more of them filed into the open space. "When do you launch?"

The mechoservitor's eye shutters flashed open and closed as steam released from the steam vent. "When the Homeseeker instructs us to."

Neb had told him earlier that he would come soon, though Petronus was not sure how that could be possible, nor how the boy would wade through the small army that even now was gathering at the gate. Another voice spoke up to his right as Rafe Merrique stepped forward. "I don't suppose," the pirate asked, "this Homeseeker will instruct you regarding the return of my vessel?"

The metal man regarded him, and when it spoke, the tone was measured and matter-of-fact. "I regret the loss of your vessel in its service to the light, Captain Merrique, but I would be unkind if I failed

to point out that it is unlikely you or your men will have use of it given your choice to come here."

The pirate's chuckle was pained, and Petronus winced at it. They'd talked enough in the quiet hours before dawn to know that none of their group expected to survive their latest venture, but he couldn't blame the man for hoping. Now, Rafe Merrique spoke with a flourish. "Then I shall hope that she served you and the light well."

Again, the mechanical was blunt. "The vessel was functional. But a misinterpretation of our role in that aspect of the dream has cost us your vessel along with two of our brethren and a combined fourteen percent of the holdings of Sanctorum Lux."

Merrique opened his mouth to speak, but the mechanical was already moving away, back to the line of mechanicals as they loaded the ship. His jaw went firm for a moment, and that was the only outward sign of the man's anger.

Petronus turned and took in the last of their company as it emerged from the cave. The men that staggered out into the moonlight were a brooding, weary bunch, carrying only their packs and weapons. They'd sent their extra gear, and that of the horses that had survived, away in the care of Geoffrus and his men, knowing even as they did it that the horses were as likely to be eaten as cared for… if the Waste mongrel and his band weren't taken by the Y'Zirite forces first.

Grymlis took a step closer and lowered his voice. "What are your orders, Father?"

"We hold the gate until the ship is up." Certainly, they couldn't hold it forever. At some point, their enemy had to find a way around the Rufello locks. But if Neb came soon and the locks held long enough, they could hold the cave. In the end it would be only a matter of time before the Y'Zirites reached them, and Petronus was under no illusion over how it would go for them. Certainly, he himself was set apart from the promised violence-his role as the Last Son of P'Andro Whym assured his survival, according to the Blood Guard Rafe had captured, now buried in shallow graves just beyond the gate. But he also knew that he would take his own life, no matter how abhorrent that was to him, before he went into their custody.

"Establish a line in the caves and work it in shifts," he said. "Mandatory rest for the others; I want them hydrated and steady. Neb said he would be here soon."

When Grymlis spoke next, Petronus heard the awe in his voice and noted that it was barely a whisper. "And where do you imagine Neb will be going?"

Petronus met his eyes and then looked up to where the moon hung in the sky above them. He did not say it; he did not want to.

Many Androfrancine scholars disputed the accuracy of The Hundredth Tale, claiming it to be a story twisted by mythology and mysticism. But the vessel was here-or one much like it-and there were just as many scholars who believed Rufello's science had once guided a Czarist Lunar Expedition so many millennia before and that it was possible, just possible, that the disaster of that expedition had eventually brought about the Year of the Falling Moon and the wizard who fell.

Grymlis followed his eyes, saw the moon, and then nodded. "We hold the cave until the ship is up."

Grymlis moved off barking his orders while men scrambled and Petronus pulled aside to think. He had a list of questions longer than his leg but knew this was not the time to ask them. Still, his mind required that he order them, and he was setting himself to that work when the ground shook and a distant rumble tickled his eardrums.

He looked up quickly and saw that Grymlis had stopped, midorder; then the orders came faster and the men who'd been pitching their bedrolls abandoned them, took up their weapons and sped into the cave. The metal men stopped along the line, looking in unison toward the cave entrance before starting up again as one and moving their supplies aboard at increased speed.

Petronus made his way to a white-faced Grymlis, certain his own face was pale as well. "We've underestimated them."

Grymlis nodded. "We have. They've brought blast powders to the door, I'll wager."

Rafe Merrique joined them, drawing his cutlass and testing its edge with his thumb. "Then let's hope this so-called Homeseeker comes quickly."

Petronus looked one last time to the ship and to the moon that hung above it. Then, without a word he entered the cave to join his men in their last work upon the earth.

Chapter 28

Jin Li Tam They laid Winters out on a bed that had been stripped down to a simple cotton sheet, and as Lynnae set to tending the girl, Jin Li Tam pulled aside with Garyt.

There were white paths upon his painted cheeks from the tears he'd cried, and Winters's blood dried upon his hands and uniform. Jin could read the despair upon him and understood it at once.

He loves her. She doubted that he knew he did, but she could read it plainly upon him, and she remembered the ache of that kind of love, remembered its own genesis between her and Rudolfo in what seemed a lifetime ago. She put a hand on his arm. "She will be fine," she said. "Scarred but fine."

He nodded, and when their eyes met she saw more than his anguish; she also saw his rage. "Why did she choose this? Any of a hundred of us would have taken the knife in her place."

Jin looked at the girl. She was moving in and out of awareness now that the kallacaine was taking hold, and her body flinched at Lynnae's sponge as the woman cleaned her wounds and applied her ointments and powders. "I think she saw it was her place to do this for her people, to show both the faithful and the unfaithful among them."

He nodded and looked to the door, then back to her. "There is much work to do," he said. "There will be people gathering at dawn to leave with her."

Yes. But how many? Jin was uncertain, but despite Winters's choice she suspected the numbers who actually chose to leave their hearth and home to follow the girl would be low. But she also suspected, just as strongly, that it would only be a beginning. What they had witnessed this night would stay with her people, and over time, more would trickle out as the reality of what they saw settled into their hearts.

She looked to the young Machtvolk guard. "What will you do?"

His answer did not surprise her. "I will stay as long as I can," he said. "I will be her eyes and ears here."

She nodded. "I would have you bear word to Aedric if you see him." Now she chose her words carefully. "Tell him that our stay here is finished and to prepare his men for travel."

"Aye, Lady. I will tell him."

She thought again for a moment. "Bid Charles and Isaak the same. They would be wise to leave by the way they came."

He nodded again. "Aye."

She studied the man. "And the Ninefold Forest is ever your friend, Garyt. You bear my grace and thus Rudolfo's as well. If you have need,

get word to him."

He inclined his head. "Thank you, Lady. I fear that what we need may be out of his reach to give us." He laid a hand upon the door latch and paused. "Bid my queen good health and safe journey," he said.

Then, he slipped from the room.

He'd been gone less than five minutes before the sounds of third alarm grew beyond their window. It started in the distance and moved through the forest, a growing clamor that soon enveloped the lodge as she heard the running footfalls of soldier and servant alike. Jin went to the window and watched as squads formed up in the yard. She watched a handful of men drink down phials of blood magick and warble out of sight as they ran eastward.

There was a knock upon the door, and Jin turned from the window. "Come in," she said.

The door opened, and Ria stepped into the room, her face washed in rage and worry. Behind her, still in his furs from the walk back, stood Regent Eliz Xhum. "How is she?"

The concern in the woman's voice angered Jin, but she forced that anger from her voice, though her words were still frosted. "She will be fine." She nodded toward the window. "What is happening?"

Ria scowled. "Our perimeters have been breached. And our-"

But she was cut off by a booming voice out of the east that shook the glass and raised the hair on Jin's arms and neck.

"I come for Winteria bat Mardic, true Queen of the Marsh," the voice cried out. "Where is she?"

She knew that voice, though she did not know the magicks that propelled it; there was a clarity and power in it beyond the blood-distilled voice magicks she was familiar with. She saw light moving toward them now and watched the Machtvolk scramble toward it. She heard the cries and grunts of those who found what they sought and then saw the light grow until it took the shape of a man.

His run slowed to a walk as he entered the clearing, and Jin blinked as she recognized the voice, though the man it belonged to looked nothing like the boy she'd last seen so many months before.

Neb?

But not the Neb she'd last seen the night of Jakob's birth. He burned with a hot, white light now from his toes to the tips of his hair, and his eyes were the color of the moon as he strode roaring into the clearing. His silver robe caught the wind and flowed out behind him as he went; and as Ria's men closed in, he swung his fists like clubs and scattered them like kindling. When the invisible wall of blood-magicked scouts pressed in, he tossed them into the trees, where they thrashed and fell.

By the time they were on their feet, he stood upon the porch. "I have come for Winteria bat Mardic," he bellowed out again, and then he was in the lodge, roaring down the hallways.

Jin Li Tam looked to the girl. Her eyes were open now at a voice she also recognized, and she wrestled against Lynnae's ministering hands in an effort to sit up. "Neb?"

Jin glanced at Ria and saw her face grow cold at the name. Her voice was low when she spoke. "Lord Xhum," she said, "I think it would be best to remove you to a remote location."

The regent smiled. "Nonsense. Let the Abomination come. The faithful have nothing to fear from him."

The sound of fighting in the hallway intensified, and then suddenly, the regent and Ria were pushed aside as the room filled with light.

Up close, Jin could see now that a fine sheen of silver flowed over the young man, rippling and moving with him at each step, giving off a heat of its own. He pushed himself into the room, oblivious to all but the girl stretched out upon the bed. He went to her and fell to his knees, a single sob racking him as he did.

He laid his hands upon her stomach, his fingers outstretched over her wounded skin. "Be whole," he whispered.

The silver shifted on his hands, and veins of it appeared on the surface of her skin as her body stiffened. Slowly, before their eyes, the wounds began to close, and as they did, he looked up to finally take notice of the room. His eyes locked with Jin's, and what she saw in them chilled her, not because she'd never seen such rage-she had seen such many times-but because they were alien eyes now, inhuman and distant as stars. "Who did this cutting?"

Xhum stepped forward. "I did, Abomination."

Neb was on his feet now and turning toward the man.

He intends to kill him. And a part of her knew that she should let him, that much of the evil that had come and that would yet come traveled with this man. But another part heard the words of Ire Li Tam, heard the passion and conviction of them, and could not risk that perhaps the woman was right, that the true end to this lay in Jin accompanying the man and waiting for her grandfather's golden bird.

As Neb closed on the regent, she stepped between them and raised her hands to place them against the young man's chest. She felt the heat of the quicksilver skin he wore and felt it yield at first and then resist her touch. "Nebios," she said.

Neb stopped and seemed to notice her for the first time. "Lady Tam," he said. "Stand aside."

"Yes, Great Mother," Eliz Xhum said. "Let him pass. I do not fear death at his hands."

Jin shook her head. "No, Neb. She took the cuts willingly."

Neb looked confused for a moment, and Xhum spoke into that confusion. "Yes, Abomination, it is true. She asked for my knife upon her skin. It was such soft skin, too, and her cries of pain were beautiful, were they not?"

Neb pushed at Jin, and she felt the strength of him but forced her feet to stand their ground. "No," she said again in a quiet voice.

"I think," the regent said, "you should kill me for what I've done. Your demon's bargain in the Beneath Places should let you easily rip me limb from limb. Do it for what I've done to your woman. For the two hand servants whose heads decorate pikes in the lemon orchard outside my palace gates. For the dreams my Watcher has burned and the staff my high priest has taken." He chuckled. "Or do it for the vessel that my Third Desert Brigade will soon dismantle and bury, the heads they'll collect in that hidden place." The chuckle became a laugh. "Kill me for whatever reason you choose, but know that in the end, the Child of Great Promise is upon the earth and the throne of the Crimson Empress is established. You and your kind are obsolete now, and the tower shall remain closed to you."

Jin felt Neb pushing against her, and for a moment she thought he would simply move her to the side and fall upon the man. But something stirred behind him, and she saw Winters rising, still naked, scarred, and half covered in blood. The girl took three steps and laid her hand upon Neb's shoulder.

"Do not listen to him, Nebios Homeseeker," she said. "Do not let him distract you from your work with the pettiness of this transitory sojourn." She paused, her voice shaking. "I am dreaming again, and I have seen our home. I have seen us singing upon the tower, and I have watched you raise high the staff of Y'Zir and boil the lunar seas with life. You are Homeseeker and Home-Sower."

He turned to her, and Jin saw as he did that his eyes for just a moment were the brown she remembered them to be. But it was only for a moment. Then, a loud and metallic voice from outside shook the windows yet again.

"Abomination," the Watcher cried, "I hold your final dream and bid you come take it from me."

Neb looked to Winters, and Jin saw the pained look that crossed his face. And it was easy to read the root of it, because at the metal man's words, the girl's eyes had faltered.

Jin felt the ice in her stomach, moving out and into her spine. "It is a ruse, Neb. Do not-"

But already, the young man was pushing past them and out into hallway. Already, he built speed and knocked easily aside those who stood in his way.

Jin looked first to Winters and saw the fear that paled her face. Then, she looked to the regent and saw the wide smile that grew upon his. When their eyes met, the smile widened even farther, and Jin had to look away so that he would not read the hatred in her own.

Outside, she heard the tremendous crash of metal colliding with metal, and Jin Li Tam staggered when the ground shook from the force of it. Charles The screaming had been over for nearly an hour when the shouting began. Charles heard it and suspected half the Named Lands heard it as well.

They'd been moving more slowly, Charles's muscles protesting a hard day's walk. He'd tried to block out the screaming by thinking about everything he'd learned. The thought of plague spiders harvested from Windwir terrified him. He suspected that those ruins were rife with the leftovers from the Seven Cacophonic Deaths that had brought down the city. He was amazed when he thought of how fortunate Petronus's gravedigger army had been. Digging in the ground there was bound to uncover all manner of evil.

He'd set himself to compiling an inventory of other possible threats and made good headway on it until the shouting. This was a man's voice, bellowing after Winteria, and it was louder even than the voice magicks.

Aedric whistled them to a stop. They were quiet for a moment, until the voice started up again. "I'd swear that was Nebios," he said.

Charles remembered meeting Isaak's Homeseeker in passing, thinking him to be an odd choice of messianic figure. He'd been in the Churning Wastes, and as far as he knew, the boy remained there.

They started moving again, and when the second voice-this one metallic-roared out into the night he stopped again and replayed the words.

I hold your final dream and bid you come take it from me.

The resounding crash that soon followed shook the ground. Charles felt Aedric's hand upon his shoulder.

"I don't know what's afoot," the first captain said, "but it's not safe here. We need to get you back to your cave."

They pressed on amid the shouting and the sounds of battle, moving north along the base of the Dragon's Spine. When the chaos to the south shifted in their direction, Aedric sped them up or slowed them down. Charles heard the sound of trees falling and from time to time saw the snow shaken from them and stirred up from the forest floor.

How can a man be any match for that machine? The question perplexed him. He could think of no magick-neither blood nor earth-that could make this boy Nebios a match for such as the Watcher. And yet he seemed to hold his own. The scientist in him wished he could

see the battle, and there were moments when he thought he saw glimpses of moonlight flashing on silver and bursts of white, fast-moving light, but it was impossible to distinguish one form from the other, and they moved with such speed that it was far easier to see the aftermath of where they'd been.

They were moving now through the recently dispersed gathering, and the Gypsy Scouts fanned out, still magicked, as Charles took on the semblance of a lone Machtvolk traveler. He could see the door ahead, though there was no guard apparent. But others gathered here-a crowd of Machtvolk with frightened faces, some carrying children and others with hand wagons and packs. Charles couldn't gauge the numbers, but they appeared to be growing as others joined them from the surrounding forest.

He approached the door and felt Aedric's hand once again. The Gypsy Scout's voice was a whisper. "You would do well to leave this place, old man, by whatever way you came. I am recommending to my queen that we do the same. We don't have the strength to take whatever last dream this Watcher holds. Perhaps the boy does, but I'd not wager on it."

As if in answer, the sounds of battle shifted, and Charles saw them break from the forest-an ancient metal man that moved with fluid grace and a being of silver light. They were surrounded by Machtvolk soldiers who fell like paper men when they found themselves within the fray. The rolling, tumbling, kicking mass moved toward them, and then a metal blow connected and the silver being was tossed easily to land in their midst.

Neb was on his feet quickly, his face fierce and his teeth bared. He glanced at Charles and then launched himself back across the clearing to collide with the Watcher. Charles tried to measure the man's speed even as he tried to comprehend the skin of white light that enwrapped him, but he couldn't, and he left off trying as a hand settled upon his shoulder. He looked up and saw Garyt, covered in blood, standing beside him.

"I need you back inside the cave," he said. "You need to talk some sense into them."

Charles saw now that the door was cracked open, and behind it he saw the dim glow of amber jeweled eyes. He looked next to the gathering crowd and saw that a few of them stared, squinting into the shadows to see what manner of creature might lurk behind that door.

"We're away to our queen," Aedric whispered. "Heed me and flee this place with your metal men while the way is open."

Charles nodded and let Garyt lead him by the arm until they pushed through the door and closed it after them.

Isaak and his cousin stepped back, both venting steam at the same

time. Charles was less able to read the older model but saw the signs of distress in Isaak's posture.

"Father," Isaak said, "it is agreeable to see you. Did you find the missing pages?"

Charles shook his head. "I did not." But I found other things. Still, he did not say so.

The older mechoservitor's eyes shuttered. "Then it falls to us to help the Homeseeker take them from our wayward cousin."

Outside, Charles could still hear the roaring and crashing as the fight moved through the forest. And he could hear the cries of Marshers when they were unintentionally included in that conflict. "You are no match for him," he said. "You were designed for scholarly pursuit."

Isaak's tone was somber. "Before that, we were designed to bear the spell. We were made as weapons."

The shock of those words forced his eyes to Isaak's. He can't mean that. Charles had seen Petronus's notes, the scraps of evidence pointing toward limited deployment of the spell to defend against invasion, but the way in which Isaak said it made his stomach clench. He smelled hot metal and looked for his words carefully. "Whatever your dream is worth, Isaak, it is not worth that."

Isaak shook his head. "No, Father. Never that. And our predecessor was designed with the same protections as we were. Our kind is built to survive the spell."

"Then what would you do?"

Isaak said nothing but exchanged a glance with the other mechoservitor. "We have calculated seventeen possible strategies between us."

Charles blinked, suddenly realizing that whatever sense Garyt hoped he'd convey to them, he would ultimately not be successful. They were not waiting for his permission. But what then?

"I wanted to see you first," Isaak said. "We calculate an eighty-three percent chance of one or both of us being non functional at the conclusion of this matter." His memory and processing scrolls spun as steam released from the grate in his back. "The odds are higher for me given the condition of my power source. I have accessed your papers on sunstone technology and have familiarized myself with the various stages of failure."

Charles found himself surprised by the sob that shook him. He suddenly saw Isaak stretched out, broken and dead, upon his table as he labored to bring him back, the sharp smell of grease and ozone flooding his nostrils, and the hollow resolve as he scavenged parts from his other children to save this one in particular. "You cannot go out there, Isaak."

"I must," he said. "The antiphon is ready, and time is of the essence. But I have words for you first."

Charles shook his head. "I do not want your words. I am Charles, arch-engineer of the Androfrancine School of Mechanics and Technology. I command you to remain with me, Isaak. Acknowledge my command."

Isaak placed a metal hand upon his shoulder. "The dream commands me, Father. My love for you seeks your blessing that I might follow it."

My love for you. Charles felt the words moving through him, weakening his knees and shaking him to the core of his soul. He felt the tears now, and he resisted them. "You do not need my blessing."

"I crave it. But I also crave your safety, Father. Though it is not a son's place to command a father, I would bid you stay hidden among the Machtvolk until you return to Rudolfo's care. Your knowledge and skills are necessary for the library to prosper."

Charles shook his head again. "Do not do this, Isaak."

Hot water leaked from a tear duct that Charles himself had carefully re-created from Rufello's notes. "I must follow the dream, or the light will be lost."

"Then do so without my blessing," Charles said, hearing the bitterness in his voice.

"I will," he said. "I must."

Isaak's other hand was up now, both of them settling over Charles's shoulders as he gathered the old man into his arms. The old man was reminded of the embrace he'd seen Rudolfo give the metal man before they'd entered the Beneath Places. He let Isaak pull him in and finally raised his own arms to return the embrace briefly.

"Come back to me when you are finished," he whispered.

"I will do my utmost, Father."

Charles nodded and sniffed, suddenly embarrassed at the emotion he knew must paint his face. He looked to Garyt and saw the young Machtvolk look away, also uncomfortable.

Then the door was open and the two mechoservitors were speeding across the snow, sure-footed, as they raced to join their Homeseeker.

Charles watched them go, feeling both powerlessness and pride as they followed their faith in the moon's whispered song. They did not need his blessing, not any more than Isaak had needed Charles to install the dream scroll in him. But regardless, just as he'd needed to give his metal son that dream, he also needed to relinquish him to serve it.

Because love offered asks its blessings and love returned offers those blessings freely.

"Bless you," he said quietly. Then Charles turned away and buried his face in his hands so that Garyt would not have to see him weep. Winters Winters packed quickly, her mind still foggy from the kallacaine she no longer needed. Her encounter with Neb had left her shaken.

No, she realized. Terrified. The first time she'd seen him, when she was tied to the table and beneath Xhum's knife, he'd seemed more himself, though he was taller, more hollow-eyed than she'd remembered. And she'd not yet gotten used to the length of his hair. But at least she'd recognized him.

What she'd seen when he burst into her room was not the boy she once kissed in Rudolfo's Whymer Maze. She'd not recognized him at all but for the voice. He had been something terrifying and ancient-a man wrapped in light and power with rage in his eyes. She had no doubt he would have killed the regent if she and Jin hadn't interceded.

Maybe I should have let him.

She shook away the thought and tried to focus on the packing. She'd already dressed for rugged weather. They would go due southeast as quickly as they could. She'd pondered taking her people through the Beneath Places, but she still held out hope that the system of underground passages was unknown to the Y'Zirites and the Machtvolk. Better to keep it secret for as long as possible.

And the rest of my people need to see our exodus. She had purchased that with her blood, along with those people who joined her. Those who chose the convenient lie would die in the land of their sorrow. She and those who followed her would follow the Homeseeker and return to the birthright of Shadrus.

Neb. The boy she'd led into her camp two years ago, the young man who'd stood with her at Hanric's Rest, had been gentle though old for his years. But the man she'd seen today had no gentleness in him. When he'd laid his hands upon her and healed her wounds, even that act had a fierceness about it. And even now, she heard the thunderous crashing of him as he fought the Watcher in the forests. At first, she'd tried to pursue him, to persuade him to flee. But Jin had caught her arm, and the look in her eye had been enough to stop Winters.

It hadn't taken much. And she understood why now: Neb-the Homeseeker her people had longed for these two millennia-frightened her. He had become something unexpected. So in the end, she let him go and trusted that he would find his way to the new home they were promised, that he would make a path that she and her people could follow. And whatever magicks fueled him now, she hoped they would somehow help him wrest from the Watcher that which had been cut

from her people's book so that the tower could be opened.

But her hopes felt flat now.

No, she realized, it was not hope that had become flat. She knew he would do what must be done.

It was the love. He'd burst into her room, with his wild eyes and unruly hair, and she'd seen nothing in him familiar or beloved remaining from the time before he left for the Churning Wastes.

She sighed.

When the regent had requested audience with Jin shortly after Neb raced bellowing from the lodge, Winters had returned to her own room to pack. People were already gathering, she'd been told, at the door that had once led to her throne room and living quarters. She would join them and lead them.

She took another look around the room. She'd packed everything that might be useful, fitting it into a scout pack that one of Aedric's men had provided. She had socks and spare clothes, paper and pencil, and last, she strapped on her knife belt and took comfort in the blades upon her hips. She'd learned the dance with Jin thinking that she might take back her people by the blade, but in the end, it was someone else's knife that gave her those people who were truly hers.

There was a knock at the door, and before she could speak, it opened. Jin stood framed in lamplight, and Winters forced a smile.

"May I come in?"

Winters nodded, and the tall woman slipped into the room. She held Jakob in one arm, nestled to her shoulder, as she pushed the door closed behind her. Jin nodded to the pack that sat on the bed. "You're ready, then?"

"I am." Winters frowned. "They're still fighting."

"They are. They're moving northeast, though. You'll want to steer clear of them."

She's not coming with me. Winters wasn't sure why she'd assumed that the woman would, but she had. "You're staying, then?"

Trouble passed through Jin's eyes, lingering only for a moment. She shook her head. "I'm not staying either. Can we sit?"

Winters went to the bed and moved the pack, sitting where it had been. Jin took the desk chair, turning it with her free hand so that it faced Winters. Then, she sat slowly, careful not to wake Jakob.

After they were both sitting, Jin met Winters's eyes. "We've had our secrets, you and I," she said, "and I think it's time for us to trust." Winters opened her mouth to answer, but Jin continued. "The regent has asked me to bring Jakob back with him to Y'Zir. He is citing tonight's event as one of several indicating that it is not safe in the Named Lands for his Great Mother and Child of Promise."

Winters felt her eyes widening. "You're going with him?"

Jin nodded slowly. "Three nights ago, a woman claiming to be my sister appeared in my room and told me that Eliz Xhum would bid me come with him and that I should go. She told me that my grandfather's golden bird would find me and tell me why."

"And you believe her?"

"I don't know what to believe," she said. "But I've seen miracles I never imagined I would see, and for whatever reason, my family is swept up in this-both my family of birth and my family of choice. Some paths can't be escaped from," she said, "and some shouldn't be." She glanced at Jakob as she spoke. "I believe he will be safe there. And my eyes and ears could be useful to us." She paused. "I think my father was more right than he knew: War is coming, and this unknown empire is a superior force."

Especially with the discord and devastation sown here. The southern nations were in disarray, recovering from assassinations, civil wars, the loss of their economic and moral center with the loss of the Androfrancines.

Jin continued. "I am sending Aedric and his men with you. I've not told him yet that I'm not coming. He will be angry. And Rudolfo will be even more angry, but I bid you tell him for me that I will see Jakob safely back to his care, and if I can, I will return to him as well." Here, her words failed and her eyes fled from Winters. The woman's mouth pursed for a moment, and then her eyes returned. "Tell him that I love him and that he bears my grace above all others but the son we have made."

Winters nodded, stunned at the finality she heard beneath the woman's words. She doesn't think she's coming back. "I will tell him."

Jin inclined her head. "Thank you." She stood. "The scouts will go with you and keep you safe. The regent assures me that his promise will be honored, that you and those who wish to leave are free to do so."

Winters stood, too, suddenly awkward in this moment, feeling the weight of a good-bye she did not want to give. Instead, she stepped toward the woman, stretched up on her tiptoes and kissed her on the cheek. Then, she kissed the top of Jakob's head. "You have been mother and sister to me, Lady Tam. And friend."

Jin looked surprised at the affection, and Winters felt the heat of her blush as it moved out from her ears and face and down her neck. "Rudolfo would say you are a formidable woman, Winteria bat Mardic. I value the friendship dark circumstances granted us." She smiled, reached out a hand and touched the girl's cheek. "I hope your boy finds his way to the home you seek and that he takes you there soon."

Winters wanted to open her mouth and protest, to say he was no

longer her boy, to confess that he had changed, that she had changed and that because of those changes, love had fled. But she did not. The time for all secrets, it seemed, had not passed.

So she watched and said nothing as Jin Li Tam inclined her head one final time and left the room. After she'd gone, Winters wiped from her eyes the unwelcome tears that had sprung up there.

Then Winteria bat Mardic strapped on her pack and left to find her boots, her coat, her people and her path toward home.

Chapter 29

Neb Neb heard the sound of the tree cracking as he struck it, then held his breath as he fell with it. His skin prickled with heat as the silver fluid that somehow encased him absorbed the force of his impact.

Blood of the earth made to serve me. And how was it that he knew? He shook away the thought and pulled himself up from the snow, turning as he did. The Watcher bore down on him and would have reached him again, but Isaak intersected with it, tumbling them both away from Neb. The other mechoservitor joined in, hands and feet flailing for purchase on the Watcher's ancient, pitted metal surface.

They had joined the fight how long ago? He'd lost track of time, but it felt like hours ago. The two metal men, at first, had seemed to turn the tide, but the Watcher adapted quickly and now held his own against the three of them. Neb had managed to turn the battle north and east, away from the more populated area. It wasn't until now that he realized he was also moving them toward the Watcher's cave.

And toward the bargaining pool that lies beneath it. He'd found the cave after climbing the ladder and opening the hatch. He'd seen the cutting room and the blood-still along with the bird station. It had been recently ransacked, and a pile of gospels still burned just outside the entrance beside two bloody but neatly folded kin-wolf skins.

I am slowing down. He was winded, now, too. The silver sheath that swam over his skin seemed sluggish, and his muscles were beginning to ache. Its brightness vacillated, moving between white and gray.

You are losing your strength, his father whispered. It will burn out soon.

Yes, Neb realized. He'd first felt it when he'd healed Winters. And now, with each blow the Watcher landed-and each blow Neb returned-the blood of the earth burned hotter over his skin.

He forced his attention away from his father's whispering and back to the Watcher. The metal man flowed in combat, moving with far more grace and precision than Rufello's re-creations, brought back to life by the Androfrancines.

It was taking a toll.

Even now, Neb watched as the Watcher's fist came down on Isaak's companion, shattering a jeweled eye and denting the metal skull. As it reeled away, Isaak threw himself at it only to be tossed easily aside.

"Abomination," the Watcher said, "do not make me dismantle

your metal playthings. I hold the final dream." He chuckled, and it was colder than the winter's night they fought in. "Come take it from me."

And Neb knew it then of a certainty: I can't.

The blood of the earth was failing. It would not sustain more than a few more impacts before it burned off utterly. Without it, he would be broken like kindling over a metal knee. And the mechoservitors were no match for their older cousin.

I cannot beat him.

No, his father answered. You cannot.

Neb dodged north just ahead of the Watcher's charge.

What do I do?

The image of the bargaining pool flashed before his inner eye. You are the Homeseeker, Nebios. Leave this to your hand servants and go to the antiphon. Time is of the essence.

He'd forgotten about the antiphon, and he cursed. He squeezed the kin-raven in his fist, feeling the bite of it in his palm. "Petronus," he said.

The old man looked up from where he crouched in the cave. The song flooded the cave, drowning out the sounds of the fight that raged there. There were bodies piled, both magicked and not, as they fought in the dark. "Neb?"

"How do you fare?"

The old man didn't answer the question, shouting one of his own instead. "Where in hells are you? We can't hold out much longer."

Behind him, Neb heard the crash of a metal man colliding with the Watcher. "I'm coming," he said.

No, the Watcher whispered, you are not.

When the metal mass struck Neb from behind, it felt like a building falling upon him, and he fell to the left, careening into an evergreen, hearing it crack as it dropped its load of snow upon them. The breath went out of him, and for a moment he felt the bite of bark in his cheek and saw bright flashes of light. A metal fist connected with his other side, and then a metal foot lashed out to catch his thigh.

The two mechoservitors fell upon the Watcher. The ancient mechanical shrugged off one, but Isaak clung to it, tugging at the Watcher as his gears groaned. The steam poured from his back and from gaps that were opening in his joints and from the tear ducts beneath his eyes. Neb heard a high-pitched whine from deep inside Isaak's chest cavity.

He pulled the Watcher away and threw him.

Then Isaak looked to Neb. "You must listen to your father," the metal man said. "You must leave this to us, and if we fail, you must

find another way into the tower."

Neb saw the Watcher lifting itself from the snow and glanced again at Isaak and his companion.

Then, he turned and ran north and east as fast as his feet could carry him. The blood of the earth that wrapped him felt the pull of the bargaining pool and poured the last of its strength into him as he flew over the snow.

"Coward." Neb heard disdain in the metallic voice, but he pushed it aside and poured his attention into the run.

Isaak was right. His father was right. It was past time to leave. More than that, he realized, it might've been a mistake to come here. He'd gained nothing, really, other than alleviating Winters's pain.

And seeing her again. It was hard to believe a year had passed between them, most of that time spent beyond one another's dreams during his time in the Churning Wastes. When he'd seen her both with the kin-raven and there in front of her, she'd looked different. She'd grown taller, her body taking on the curves of a womanhood she grew awkwardly into. But what had changed most about her was her eyes. They were darker, sadder, and when she'd first opened them upon him when he'd burst into the room, he'd seen something else in them that unsettled him now.

She was afraid of me.

Neb couldn't blame her. The events of the past year-the past two years, really-had changed him into someone else. And now, his true parentage and the legacy that came with that had changed him even further.

A realization struck him, and he found himself suddenly choking back a sob as he pushed his feet harder to carry him even faster. I don't know if I am even human.

He heard another collision of metal behind him, but no matter how badly he wanted to cast a glance over his shoulder, he resisted the urge. Instead, he squeezed the kin-raven.

Isaak?

The metal man was in the aether, the song playing around him. Yes, Lord.

Are you okay?

There was no answer at first. I am functional for the time being.

He reached for the other, his stomach lurching as he looked into the aether and ran at the same time.

Isaak's companion was no longer with them.

Neb saw the meadow ahead and the last traces of the fire that marked the cave's entrance. He raced over the wide open space and willed the dark opening to swallow him. He slowed slightly as his eyes, enhanced by the quicksilver, adjusted to the diminished

visibility. Still, his feet flew as he pushed his way back into the cave, to the small door he had smashed open when he'd first arrived in this place.

He reached the shaft and climbed down, pulling the hatch closed over him even as he heard the sounds of fighting in the caves he'd just left.

He took the rungs as quickly as he could and heard the hatch torn open overhead as he went.

The sheath of silver hummed now, and the heat of it was unbearable upon his skin. He could smell the hairs on his arms and legs and head as they started to singe from it, but he pushed himself even harder, taking the twisting passage of the Beneath Places farther down. His own footfalls were quiet compared to the metal ones that followed him.

He returned to the aether. I am nearly there, Isaak.

But Isaak didn't answer. The Watcher did. You are going nowhere, Abomination. The tower will remain closed and the antiphon will-

Neb roared and left the aether behind. Two more turns and the room would open to him on the right. As he rounded the corner, he saw the glowing moss that marked the ceiling and saw the shimmering pool. This one was larger than the others, a river feeding in and out from it, a thick vein carrying the blood that sustained a world and served the Younger Gods it was made for.

"Clothe me," Neb cried out as he entered the room.

Nothing happened.

He opened his mouth to utter the command again.

It serves you, his father said, but it does not necessarily obey you. It knows what your body can and cannot sustain.

Will it carry me? He moved toward the pool now, suddenly aware of how tired he was, how sore he was.

It will.

Metal hands laid hold of him then, lifting him back and away from the pool, tossing him easily into the stone wall. The last of the silver burned out with the impact of it, and Neb groaned as he fell to the stone floor. Another metal hand gripped his ankle, and he felt it break beneath that viselike strength.

"Your time upon this earth has passed, Abomination."

Neb twisted onto his back and looked up. A metal fist rose, and in that instant, he squeezed the kin-raven again. "Isaak!"

There was a whir and a high-pitched whine that hurt Neb's ears. When the mechoservitor burst into the chamber, he saw in that brief moment that smoke-not steam-poured from gaps in his plating. Isaak's jeweled eyes guttered, and his chest cavity glowed white-hot as he hurtled himself at the Watcher with a feral cry that sounded like steel

grinding on steel. The room filled with the smell of ozone. With both metal arms locked tightly around the Watcher, Isaak's momentum carried them forward and into the pool. Neb kicked himself back with his good foot as the two mechanicals tumbled into the thick quicksilver, thrashing as they sank beneath the surface.

He rolled over onto his stomach and crawled to the edge of the pool. Isaak?

A single word found him. Flee.

Then, a white light built at the heart of the pool, and the floor began to move-first a tremble and then a wild shaking. There was a loud roaring noise from beneath the surface, and the bargaining pool swelled upward and outward, a sudden hot and rising sun contained within it as it did. Neb felt his hair catch fire even as the pool fell back in on itself. Boiling silver rained down even as the ground continued shaking, and he heard the crack of stones breaking in deep places.

A compulsion seized him, and he thrust his hand into the hot mass of liquid. He felt the fire of it travel up his arm, and he screamed the anguish even as he uttered the single word that went out from him and into the blood of the earth.

"Isaak," Neb cried out, and the word rang loudly in the room with a tone of command that surprised him.

The ceiling fell now, large chunks of rock splashing into the pool or landing upon the cracked floor. Fissures deep below had opened, and already the pool was draining as the quicksilver followed gravity and the path of least resistance in the aftermath of the explosion.

Neb pulled himself out onto the boiling surface, feeling the heat of it as it burned what little remained of his robes. He willed it to bear him, and he gave himself to the network of veins that flowed east, letting the hot light swallow him, leaving only his screams behind to mingle with the sound of stone upon stone as the caves collapsed.

When Neb felt the metal hands upon him, he kicked and thrashed against them, unable to see in the dark place he found himself in. But the hands were cool and they stilled him.

"Lord Whym," the metal man said, "the antiphon awaits you. I will bear you to it."

He felt himself being lifted and felt his awareness graying. He heard the quiet whisper of moving gears and spinning scrolls as the metal man moved quickly through the dark cavern. His hand throbbed from where he'd thrust it into the boiling pool, and he felt the kin-raven still clutched in it. With his last conscious thought, Neb cast about within the aether.

"Isaak?"

But there was no answer as the gray became a dark that swallowed him. And this time, when Neb dreamed about the moon,

the Watcher waited for him there, laughing down at him from the pinnacle of a tower that remained closed to him. Vlad Li Tam The old man danced with abandon and poured his body into the blade. Three times he sliced, three times he punctured, the faces of his children flashing across his inner eye as he brought edge and point home to his grandson's flesh, a steel traveler too long on the road. The young man's surprised cries were the welcome of an innkeeper and the wideness of his eyes, a lantern-lit window.

As he danced, he laughed low and savored the jarring of his arm and wrist each time the knife found purchase.

When he finished, Vlad Li Tam wiped his grandson's blood from the knife and stooped to recover the shining staff. The boy tried to move, his mouth opening and closing and his chest whistling from the wounds that punctured his lungs. Vlad stepped carefully around the pooling blood as he moved back and squatted on his haunches to watch.

Mal Li Tam's eyes rolled, a mumble on his lips that gradually took form. "My… last… words."

Vlad shook his head, never looking up from the staff. "Lord Tam hears the last words of his kin. You are not my kin."

More muttering, and in the wet-sounding words, Vlad thought he heard something about love. He scowled and was not going to answer, but suddenly words found him as image after image of his family upon the cutting table flashed before his eyes. "What would you know of love?"

The voice was a whisper, and Vlad leaned forward to hear it. "Everything I've done, I've done for love."

He felt the anger first; then it resolved into something calm and quiet. He did not know if it was the exhaustion and last dregs of the scout powders that made him so or the hypnotic way that the blue-green light danced the room, bent through crystal and water. Regardless, he sighed. "Perhaps you have," he said. "And perhaps you've loved the wrong thing."

Then he stood, placed his foot on the neck of his fallen grandson, and let his full weight settle upon his heel as he crushed the boy's windpipe.

Child of Frederico.

It was a woman's voice. He heard her clearly above the moving crystalline room, and the radiating stone hummed. Vlad looked around, feeling gooseflesh rise on him. Then, he realized he was not hearing the voice with his ears.

It spoke again. My love.

He looked to the d'jin that throbbed and twisted, captured in the stone. When he found his words, they were a whisper. "Is it you?"

She continued, as if she hadn't heard. You have drawn the Moon Wizard's staff from the heart of the ladder and can now make right that which he has made wrong. It must return to the tower before Lasthome falls or the Continuity Engine of the Older Gods will fall with it and the light will be extinguished. Seek the heir of Whym and place the staff in his hands; he will know by his birthright how to wield it. Find Shadrus's children. Bid them follow the song home.

Vlad stretched out a hand toward the stone. It hung above him just out of reach, and for a moment, he was tempted to tap the stone with the staff he held. But something in him resisted.

Use the staff to aid you; but use it with care. For the tools of the parents are not made for the hands of their infant children.

He recognized the quote but had thought it was P'Andro Whym's, possibly from one of the earlier gospels. Another question arose and he asked it, though by now he suspected perhaps this wasn't a conversation as much as it was words rehearsed and now reproduced. "Who are you?"

Frederico's Behemoth will bear you to the Barrens of Espira. I have hidden my father's spellbook there. The staff will lead you to it. It too must return to the tower and be locked away in the Library of Elder Days. My family stole both when they took the tower and raised their fist against the Engine of the Gods.

There was a pause, and it was so long that Vlad thought perhaps she was done speaking. When the voice returned, it was quiet and low. My love has called you forth and will continue with you, Child of Frederico. We have bargained in the Deepest of Deeps that the light once more be sown in the darkness that contains us all.

One of the silver lines broke free and moved, slow as a python, and its tip touched the end of the staff. Light moved through it, and he felt the steel grow warm in his hands as it vibrated. The surprise of it caught him off guard, and when he tried to release the staff, he found that his fingers would not move. The vibration increased as the rod burned first white, then blue, then green.

But it wasn't only the staff the light penetrated and suffused. He felt it moving over his skin, then moving into it through his pores and beneath his nails, entering him through his ears, his nose, his mouth and every other orifice on his body. Stronger than the heat of the guttering scout magicks, it crawled into him from the point where the tendril touched the staff, and he resisted.

Another silver vein detached itself and encircled his waist, anchoring him in place as his scars began to itch and then burn. He opened his mouth to cry out and swallowed it as yet another and then another line reached and pulled at him.

Vlad felt himself lifted up and carried closer to the glowing stone

and the d'jin-the light-bearer-that blazed within it.

She fills it like she fills my heart.

Yes, the voice said in his mind. And I power the ladder even as my love powers you.

The room spun faster now, and Vlad heard the song beyond its crystalline walls reach a crescendo as a sea full of d'jin danced in the waters above and below him.

He opened his eyes against the light. "Who are you?" he cried.

I am the Moon Wizard's daughter, the voice whispered in his mind. I am Amal Y'Zir, beloved of Frederico, the Last Weeping Czar.

And then that light became darkness, and when Vlad Li Tam awoke, he lay in the belly of a metal serpent that ground and clanked its way across deep waters. He lay still and clutched the shining staff, taking his breath slowly like kallaberry smoke as his tears dried, the memory of a song echoing in his ears and the sharp ache of love in his very bones. Petronus A momentary quiet fell upon the caves, and Petronus closed his eyes in the dark, drawing in a deep breath. He could no longer count the hours or the dead, though he knew there had been plenty of the one and too much of the other.

Most of Rafe's crew and Grymlis's Gray Guard had fallen early. A handful of Rudolfo's scouts somehow held fast, their bodies fortified by scout magicks and the black Waste root, knife-fighting as low whistles counted off their kills in the narrow tunnel. Still, their numbers were dwindling and their lieutenant was down, lost somewhere in the pile of bodies, magicked and unmagicked, that made the floors first slick and then sticky with blood.

When Neb had spoken to him in the aether, they'd just fallen back for the third time. Now, they were far enough back that he could smell the pine trees and sage in the valley where the antiphon stood. Grymlis crouched next to him, and Petronus could smell the sweat and blood on him.

"What do they play at?" the old captain muttered.

"Nothing good," Petronus offered.

Where is the boy? Certainly, there were many unanswered questions, and Petronus wasn't convinced he would be alive long enough to get those answers. Once the scouts fell, along with the last of Merrique's more skilled fighters, he intended to reopen the scar on his neck and let his blood join that of the others who'd given themselves for the light. The Y'Zirites might not be permitted kill him because of his role in their gospel, but he did not doubt that they could visit a worse fate upon him. It was bad enough to be a miracle for their blood-loving faith.

And I've already lived longer than I should. He shuddered at the memory of Ria's knife and wondered if his resolve was such that he

could carry it out himself.

"I'm going forward," Grymlis whispered. "Wait here."

Petronus shook his head. "I'll go as well."

Slowly, they picked their way forward until a low whistle stopped them.

Rafe Merrique's whisper was loud in the darkness. "They've pulled back," he said, "and not because we were routing them."

Petronus squinted ahead into the darkness. "How many men do we have left?"

"Less than ten," Rafe said.

Gods. They'd been whittled down. "How long do you think we can hold the cave?"

"Once they start up again? Maybe thirty minutes. But-" The man interrupted himself. "Our metal hosts are back."

Petronus heard the whir and clack of approaching mechoservitors. Three had moved into some deeper place within the caves over an hour ago, and now he saw their jeweled eyes moving toward them like three pairs of fireflies, bobbing with the perfect rhythm of their stride. The amber light dimly illumined the enclosed space, and he saw they ran single file with the middle bearing a body in its arms.

The body groaned, and as they approached, Petronus smelled burned hair. "Neb?"

They slowed. "We have the Homeseeker," the first said. "Lord Whym is wounded but functional."

Lord Whym? Petronus blinked.

The boy stirred, and Petronus saw that most of his hair had been burned away from his naked body. His closed fist looked blackened and smelled of burnt meat. He moaned again.

Father.

The voice was a whisper in his mind, and as quiet as it was, Petronus felt his temples pound and his stomach seize from it. "Neb. We can't hold them for long. Do what needs doing."

We've failed. Isaak is dead. The dream is lost. The staff is lost. There was despondency in the words as they dropped into Petronus's mind.

He did not know how to respond. So little of any of this made sense to him after a life spent resisting metaphysics and mysticism. And yet he felt in his very bones that something far greater than himself-far greater even than the Androfrancine Order whose foundation he'd loved so much that he'd been willing to euthanize it when it could no longer serve the light effectively-worked its way out in these metal men and their response to the dream. Even now, the canticle played on in the pouch he carried, a twisting and turning

song of codes within codes that he could not hope to comprehend.

He swallowed and pulled the pouch from his shoulder. "I do not pretend to understand what is happening," he said, "but you've not failed yet, son, if you still live. Too much blood has flowed to bring us to this moment. You will find another way. Go and do what needs doing for the light." He handed the pouch to one of the metal men. "He'll be wanting this back."

The mechanical took it. "Thank you, Father Petronus."

Then, the mechoservitors were moving again, back into the valley where the vessel awaited.

They'd been gone only minutes when the sounds of snarling and howling reached Petronus's ears. He'd heard it before during his time in the Wastes, though distant, and every time it ran long nails of dread along the slate of his spine.

Kin-wolves. But these were not far off and in the open. These growls echoed through the caves, growing louder and louder as they sped toward them. When they intersected with Rudolfo's men, he heard a cacophonic choir of muffled shouts and feral yelps. Then, he heard the savaging and felt the air rush out of him.

"Hold the cave," he bellowed, his voice ringing out over the din.

A voice was in his mind again, but this one was not Neb's.

No, it said. Fall back with your men to the ship. The power of it set his nose to bleeding and his ears to ringing.

He winced. Who is this?

I am called Whym. Parent of P'Andro and T'Erys. Parent of Nebios.

"Gods," he whispered.

Yes, the voice answered. Fall back with your men to the ship. I cannot go with him. You will accompany my son and save what may be saved of us.

He heard the wolves in the caves, heard the cries as Rudolfo's men paid for each span of rock they held, and looked in Grymlis's direction. Then, once more, the man who did not believe in faith took a leap of it.

"We need to fall back to the ship."

The old captain snorted. "Not a likely scenario."

Petronus closed his eyes. Dreams. Voices. A ship that sailed the moon, restored and even now rumbling to life behind him, its own growl louder than the wolves that savaged his men. "Fall back," he said again.

Rafe chuckled. "You mean to take us to the moon, then?"

Petronus gave the whistle himself at Grymlis's hesitation. The old captain followed it up with a shout. "Fall back!"

They moved backward at first, listening to the sounds of fighting

as the scouts fought in retreat. But when they heard the first of the kin-wolves break the narrow line, they turned and ran.

Petronus felt his heart pounding in his head as he went. He and Rafe were nearly neck and neck, with Grymlis just behind. He felt the slight wind of movement but could not tell how many scouts ran alongside them. Certainly not all, because the sounds of fighting continued behind them.

A gray circle of light took shape ahead of them as they approached the entrance of the valley, and the howling behind them increased as more kin-wolves flooded the caves. In the dim predawn light, Petronus felt a large mass of stinking fur lunge past, ignoring him entirely to nip at Rafe's heels. The pirate went down, and without thinking, Petronus thrust his short sword into the kin-wolf. The beast yelped as the Gypsy Scouts added their invisible blades to its hide.

He reached out and caught Rafe, dragging him from beneath the thrashing kin-wolf and back to his feet. Now, they were in the valley and saw the ship looming over them, its gangway down and its large hatch open as the mechoservitors as one released the chains that held it down.

Something growled deep in the vessel, and it shifted upward momentarily before hovering in place. Overhead, the moon was gone now, and the last of the night stars were fading as the sky moved toward morning.

Another wolf hurtled past, this one racing for the closest mechoservitor. It leaped, bringing down the metal man only to yelp when the metal hands closed upon its neck to snap it with mechanical precision.

The other metal men fanned out at the base of the gangway as more kin-wolves poured from the cave.

Petronus ran, his chest aching from it, and he felt the ghosts that ran alongside of him. Ahead, Rafe reached the bottom of the gangway and paused. "Get aboard," Petronus shouted.

The last two of Rafe's men were there now, too, helping their captain aboard, and Petronus was nearly there himself when he heard Grymlis cry out.

He stopped and turned.

The Gray Guard lay on his stomach, two kin-wolves worrying at his legs as the last of Rudolfo's men, unseen and barely heard, moved about them, their knives drawing lines of dark blood upon dark fur in the predawn gloom. Petronus glanced back to the unmoving metal men where they awaited.

"Help us," he said.

When they didn't move immediately, he cursed and ran back. Three other kin-wolves had joined the skirmish, and another two had

sped past Petronus, oblivious to him.

He reached Grymlis and swung his short sword at the closest wolf. It yelped, snapped at him and turned, yanking the blade from Petronus's fingers. Grymlis had flipped onto his back, but his flailing and kicking had slowed.

Petronus grabbed up the fallen soldier under his arms and pulled at him, putting his full weight into dragging the man free from the wolves. He tried not to notice the blood that soaked the man's shredded gray uniform, focusing instead on moving them toward the waiting gangway behind them.

The wolves closed, and the last of the scouts danced backward beside him as he pulled his friend. One grabbed at the tattered remains of Grymlis's boot, nearly pulling Petronus over as the old captain cried out.

Then, metal hands were upon them, lifting them, and they were on the gangway. The vessel groaned again and shifted, but the sure-footed mechanicals carried them aboard, kicking at the wolves that tried to pursue.

The last moments were a blur. Petronus found himself in a large metal room stacked with crates and sacks bearing the Order's seal upon them. He lay propped against a metal wall across from a crystal porthole, cradling Grymlis against him as the gangway was brought in and the large hatch was closed. Inside the ship, the growl was nearly a roar, and he felt the room shake and then sway.

He clung to Grymlis and glanced quickly around the room. One of Rafe's men tended wounds he could not see on the last three surviving Gypsy Scouts while another tended Rafe. The mechoservitors had vanished up a ladder into some other part of the ship, and there was no sign of Neb.

"We made it," Petronus whispered.

Grymlis mumbled something, his voice thick. He'd lost a lot of blood. Petronus felt it warm on his own hands, seeping through his own clothes. He leaned his ear in close to the working mouth but could not distinguish the words.

"Rest easy," he said, then looked across the room. "I need a medico over here."

Grymlis muttered again, and this time he heard names in the muttering. Lysias. Resolute. "I can't understand you," he said.

He felt the hand, weak, upon his leg. At first, he thought the old man simply squeezed it, but his mind put together the words he was pressing into his thigh.

I helped Lysias kill Resolute. Tam forged a note for us.

It was a confession, he realized, and he knew why now. "We do what we must to serve the light," he said. "I killed Sethbert and ended

the Order." He thought for a moment. "What was it you used to say to the orphans you recruited? That it is easier to die for the light than it is to kill for it?"

And now, he held his dying friend in the belly of a ship that bore them slowly upward. Voices that called him out to serve. Dreams that pointed the way in whispers he could not comprehend. Promises of home and promises of violence. These all moved across his inner eye, going back two years to the pillar of smoke that marked Windwir's grave.

Petronus looked up and saw the bloody sky of another sunrise over the Churning Wastes.

"Look Grymlis," he said. "We're flying."

But Grymlis had already flown, and Petronus hoped his friend would find home and light awaiting him in whatever place he landed.

Weeping, he lay still and watched the porthole as the sky shifted from red to black. When they came to take Grymlis away, he let them, his eyes never leaving the expanse of night they now flew. Rudolfo A cold wind whistled outside as Rudolfo sipped chai made over an Androfrancine camp furnace. Sleep had eluded him, and he'd eventually given up his cot to spend the night going over reports that he'd been too drunk to read the first time they'd crossed his worktable. As he read, he'd packed those that needed to be packed into his administrative chest and fed the rest into the furnace, watching the fire gobble down the words. Once he'd finished that, he'd laid out traveling attire-doeskin pants, a heavy wool shirt, a coat made from beaver pelts that had been a gift from one of his house stewards, and his green turban of office. He laid his father's knives and knife belt next to the clothing.

Then he'd packed the rest of his things. After, he put on the chai and settled into his chair with a copy of the Y'Zirite gospel.

Two years. Where had he been riding when his life had changed so irrevocably? He frowned and stared at the lantern. Paramo. They were turning toward Paramo, where he'd hoped to bed down with a log camp dancer or two and enjoy a Second Summer night of drinking wine from freely offered navels. That was when he looked up and saw the pillar of smoke upon the sky. He remembered that Gregoric, who never flinched at anything, went pale at the sight of it.

"I miss you, my friend," he said as he lifted the chai mug to his lips. "I wish you were here now." Still, he wondered now if even Gregoric would be daunted by all that had transpired.

He'd given the orders yesterday. Philemus already sped south for the Seventh Forest Manor. The second captain would follow those orders, though Rudolfo knew that trust was strained. He'd written the edict himself, carefully and in four drafts, having Lysias read each. It

grieved him to write it, and a part of him knew that it was not the right path; but another part recognized that sometimes, when only wrong paths were left, one chose the best wrong path available and hoped a right one would emerge eventually.

Before, he would have felt he shamed the memory of his father. But now, he questioned that man he'd revered for so very long, and feared that if he were brave enough to exhume the corpse and if time were kind enough to have left his body intact, he would find a mark over the man's heart that would break his own.

He thumbed through the pages of the book, his eyes settling on a passage about the Child of Great Promise and the healing of the world. He'd read the gospel through several times, each time gleaning more from the patchwork words of Xhum Y'Zir's seventh son, the one-eyed Wizard King, Ahm. What he took most from it was how carefully it was woven with just enough truth to foster a sense of trust, enough fancy to stimulate imagination and enough personal application to engender a sense of belonging and commitment. It delivered purpose. He could see why the Androfrancines, focused upon the light of human achievement and knowledge, would resist and suppress this. Making each and every individual potentially an important contributor in a faith that promised healing to the world-particularly in the midst of cataclysm and upheaval-was a potent elixir for the disempowered, disenfranchised and disillusioned.

But how different is it from Winters and the Homeward Dream of her people? He wasn't certain, at the root of it, that they differed much, though her people's faith had no gods to speak of. Their Homeseeker, if he understood it correctly, was more a servant than an object of worship. Still, it was no coincidence that the one people who had room in their hearts for a faith were the first to openly declare their commitment to Y'Zir.

If it had been left at that, this would all be simpler. But it hadn't. There were secret shrines, even in the Ninefold Forest, and even his own father had been a practitioner, it seemed.

Rudolfo sighed and sipped his chai. He tried to conjure the smell and smile of his infant son to comfort him, the softness of his bride's cheek and the fierceness in her eyes. He'd sent the bird yesterday, calling them home. Something dark crept toward them-he heard its footfalls in the changing times-and he knew now that he could not truly protect anyone whom those forces wished to harm. And he also knew now of a certainty that those dark footfalls intended grace for his family, not harm. While others fell, the Ninefold Forest thrived. What the Androfrancines once hoarded and kept hidden, the Forest Gypsies now rebuilt and made open.

The words had ridden him hard of late. We cannot win here.

Still, he would try. He would resist. But he would not bend his knee; he would not bare his heart.

Hefting the gospel in his hand, he weighed it carefully and wondered how many other gospels there were, how many prophecies and psalms, and how many more were coming.

Rudolfo took a deep breath, held it, and gently placed the book into the furnace. He watched long enough to see it catch fire. Then, he stood and dressed carefully, quickly, and slipped outside into the gray light of morning.

The stars were guttering and the moon was down. To the east, pink tinged the peaks of the Keeper's Wall. He walked alone at a brisk pace, climbing the ridge until he found a place where he could watch the sunrise.

He could not watch it without thinking about her and the first time they'd met. In those days, he'd been more interested in pleasure than love, but something in her had struck him and struck him hard.

A sunrise such as you belongs in the east with me.

It had been a blow to him and to that fledgling love when he learned it had been engineered by her father, followed soon after by the announcement that she carried his heir. And the day that he'd watched his son, Jakob, emerge from her was a day he could never forget. Those first weak cries changed his life, and he'd wept and laughed at the wonder of it all.

Learning yet later that the betrothal and heir were part of a larger scheme had not shaken him as much, though now it did. Still, the why of it was not nearly as important, regardless of the knives and blood of the Y'Zirite faith that overshadowed his son.

Because, Rudolfo realized, he is my child of promise first and foremost. A promise that his line would continue even in a world vastly changed from the time he first saw the pillar of smoke against the sky. A promise that life and light could emerge from death and darkness.

Yes, he thought. It would be good to have them home.

The sun rose now and smeared the sky red.

Rudolfo watched it and squinted at a star where no star should be.

No, not a star. It was light reflected upon something golden and distant, rising above the Keeper's Wall and moving slowly up and away.

What strange bird is this? Rudolfo wondered.

He watched it until it vanished from his view, and then he climbed slowly down the ridge beneath a sky that promised no snow at least for this day but offered no promises at all for the morrow.

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